



*“I do find myself being less of myself when I’m there”*

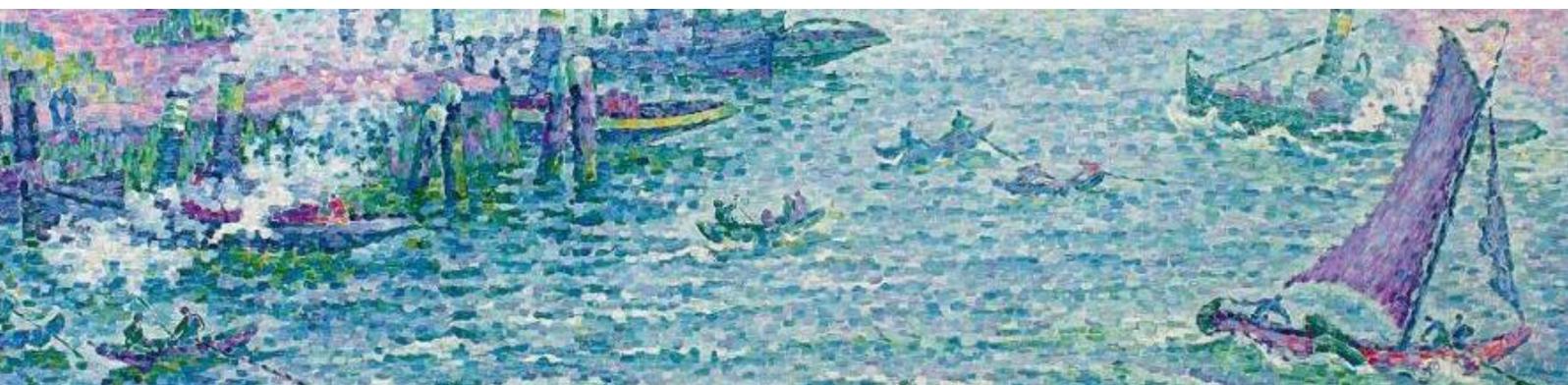
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**Dutch vocational students’ experiences in  
relation to safety and identity negotiation in the  
context of their educational institute**

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To my sister, for being my eternal inspiration.

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## **Abstract**

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This thesis examines how students in a Dutch vocational secondary educational institute experience (un)safety, and how this relates to the (conscious or unconscious) act of showing and/or hiding (non)normative aspects of their identities (i.e., identity negotiation). In order to understand the results of this study, (theories on) the dense and relative concepts of safety, safe spaces and identity are unpacked in the context of educational institutes.

With the aim to answer the main research question and sub-questions, qualitative research was conducted at STC Group. STC Group is an educational company within the logistics, technology and maritime sectors offering programmes on a wide range of educational ‘levels’. Ethnographic research was conducted amongst various types of employees of the organisation, in-class discussions were held with seven classes, and in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 vocational students at STC.

During the research, it became apparent that an image of the ideal STC student is implicitly and explicitly expressed by (people within) the school. The ideal student would, according to this polished image, be male, cisgender, white, able-bodied and heterosexual. This mirrors the normative western patriarchal idea of an ideal student, which is highly criticized from a feminist perspective, since the (institutional) norms lead to injustice for those who cannot meet the standards.

In analysing the 12 interviews with students, it furthermore became apparent that the students in this Dutch professional secondary educational institute tend to state they feel (physically) safe, while their other remarks suggest that parts of their educational environments contribute to (perhaps subtle) feelings of (social-emotional) unsafety. This implies that the unsafety, discrimination and expectations regarding ‘normative’ behaviour are internalized to the extent that students seem to accept and adopt discriminatory behaviour and beliefs. As a result, - especially marginalised – individuals negotiate their identities and adjust their behaviour and looks (unconsciously) aiming to fit in, meaning some identity aspects are invigorated/accentuated, and some identity aspects are hidden/watered-down. This thesis forms a basis for future research on vocational students’ perceptions of safety and identity negotiation in educational settings, by making vocational students’ voices be heard, aiming to increase safety and encourage identity visibility in educational institutes.

Key words: safety, unsafety, safe spaces, identity, identity negotiation, identity visibility, ideal student, normativity, vocational education, students’ experiences, educational institutes.

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## **Acknowledgements**

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What a rollercoaster it has been.

Although writing this thesis made me feel lonely from time to time, I was not alone. I should thank all who helped me by standing by my side throughout the process. Without them, this would have not been possible.

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Thank you to my interviewees for being vulnerable and brave.

---

And then, thank you:

to my mom, for always understanding me, for providing me with infinite care and food, and for being strong. I can only wish to become a bit like you.

to my sister, for being my inspiration, motivation, and for not giving up even though it is hard. We will get through this.

to my godfathers, for providing me with laughter, shelter, food and support when I needed it.

to my grandmother, for being proud of me, even though you're not physically here anymore to tell me.

to D, for being my best friend, lover, and so much more. Can't wait for another adventure with you.

to K, for bringing me fruits and trying to understand.

to my biological father, for not being in my life and making me want to be braver than you.

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## **Introduction**

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On 1 February 2021, I started my internship at STC Group. STC Group is an educational institute within the logistics, technology and maritime sectors. STC<sup>1</sup> is mainly known for its many programmes on the (Dutch) levels of vmbo, havo, mbo, hbo<sup>2</sup> and Master's, and research within its sectors. STC's main office is based in Rotterdam, but the company has offices in (various places in) The Netherlands, Colombia, Oman, The Philippines and Vietnam.

During my internship, I explored in what ways STC could improve the internal diversity and inclusivity, aiming to create a safe space for its employees and students. In this respect, I defined 'safe space' as an environment in which students and employees feel comfortable, protected and free to express themselves (Holley & Steiner, 2005). My main task was to indicate which problems are encountered within STC Group regarding diversity, inclusivity and social safety, and which future actions should be taken in order to solve these problems. In order to indicate the problems, I conducted interviews with STC's vocational students<sup>3</sup>, had conversations with employees at various levels<sup>4</sup>, analysed STC's and other organisations' (diversity) policy documents, and gave presentations on gender and inclusivity.

In my final internship report for STC Group, I described my findings, mainly concerning topics such as discrimination, toxic culture(s) and unsafety within the organisation<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, throughout my research for STC Group, it became apparent that many students and employees (including myself) were holding back parts of their identities. Some stakeholders<sup>6</sup> indicated this directly, some only described examples of these feelings, and sometimes I noticed it during the interviews. As the scope of the internship did not allow to dive deeply into the assumed imposition of a normative (STC-)student, I decided to delve further into the observation regarding the (in)visibility of certain (parts of) identities within educational institutes in this

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<sup>1</sup> "STC" and "STC Group" are interchangeably used in this document.

<sup>2</sup> In English: Preparatory vocational education (vmbo), senior general secondary education (havo), secondary vocational education (mbo), and higher vocational education / applied sciences (hbo).

<sup>3</sup> By using "vocational students", I refer to mbo students (i.e. Dutch secondary vocational education students). Mbo education can be compared with junior college education. Depending on the level, the education lasts up to four years. Students who obtained a VMBO-diploma (preparatory secondary vocational education) often start a mbo programme afterwards. Although STC Group provides education at many different 'levels', the main focus will be on students and teachers (stakeholders) of the mbo school within the organisation.

<sup>4</sup> At management and teaching staff levels.

<sup>5</sup> Due to the sensitivity of the topics and provided internal information in the report, the document cannot be attached to this thesis. If you would like to see (parts of) the report, I will discuss your request with STC Group.

<sup>6</sup> I will use "stakeholders" in this thesis, referring to students, employees and managers.

thesis, assuming this has a great effect on both marginalised groups and people who do fit the profile of a ‘normative’ STC-person.

Since ‘official’ academic interviews were conducted with vocational students of STC Group, providing serious causes for concern about the imposition of the image of a normative STC student, I decided to centre *students* within this thesis’ research, also expecting the scope of this thesis to be too narrow to focus on employees’ experiences as well. Therefore, the main research question of this thesis is:

*“How do students in a Dutch vocational secondary educational institute<sup>7</sup> experience (un)safety, in relation to showing/hiding (non)normative aspects of their identities?”*

The focus on the relation between safety and the (conscious and/or unconscious) act of showing and/or hiding certain aspects of one’s identity, emerged from the fluid definition of safety as a social and societal practice established via the relation and interaction between multiple institutional, social and individual bodies (Grytnes, Grill, Pousette, Törner, & Nielsen, 2018). Before making the connection between the possible importance of educational institutes as safe spaces (Rom, 1998) and (the negotiation of) identities, the greater context of safety in which the gathered data is analysed should be defined. Therefore, the first sub question is: *“How do students understand and experience safety within the context of their educational institute?”*

Subsequently, my definition of identity will be specified. In this definition, the focus will be placed on two notions related to the visibility of identities. Firstly, the distinction between non-visible identities and visible identities will be centred. Secondly, I will address the act of making (certain aspects of) identities (extra) visible or invisible. The result of this discussion will allow me to start analysing the interviews conducted with students of STC. Making STC Group the case study of this thesis, the second sub question is: *“How do students negotiate which aspects of their identities are made visible or invisible within STC Group?”*

Assuming marginalised groups are to a greater extent affected by the possible imposition of normative identities and behaviour, particular attention will be paid to negotiation regarding identities of people (explicitly or implicitly) identifying with marginalised groups. The last sub question is therefore: *“How do marginalised groups negotiate (the presentation of) their identities in educational environments?”*

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<sup>7</sup> The Dutch vocational secondary educational institute studied is STC Group.

## **Academic and societal relevance**

First of all, the impact of COVID-19 should be acknowledged. This thesis' methodology, data and results have inevitably been impacted by (the circumstances caused by) COVID-19 (see section 2.3.1). Moreover, COVID-19 has deepened societal problems in general (Roy, 2020). Although academic publications start being published, more research is required on the long-term effects of the pandemic. Nevertheless, research has already been and is currently conducted on the consequences of the global health emergency (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020), and the issues of (un)safety and oppressive situations are among the discussed topics. For example, gender based violence increased as a result of the COVID-19 measures (Roesch, Amin, Gupta & García-Moreno, 2020), alarming trends regarding domestic violence in The United States are reported (Boserup, McKenney & Elkbuli, 2020), and the direct link between COVID-19 and China<sup>8</sup> resulted in an increase of microaggressions towards people with traditionally East Asian looks (Tessler, Choi & Kao, 2020). Based upon these three examples of increased violence only, one could presume the general safety is (negatively) impacted by the global pandemic, and this may also affect STC Group.

Secondly, the examination of (the visibility of) identities within the complex context of safety is unique within the field of Dutch vocational secondary education (as far as this is detectable). In 2003, Zoller (2003) still indicated not much was known about the connections between health, safety and identity forming. Since that time, academic articles were written on the importance and establishment of vocational identity<sup>9</sup> within vocational education (Klotz, Billett & Winther, 2014), the function of educational contexts in identity formation processes (Kaplan & Flum, 2012), the interrelatedness between an individual and educational context generating the process of identity formation (Flum & Kaplan, 2012), and the importance of creating identity safety, moderating the impact of the threat of stereotypes faced by women who aspire leadership (Davies, Spencer & Steele, 2005). Evidently, the existing literature provides a good basis regarding identity formation processes and the importance of educational context herein. This thesis' study will add a focus on the expected importance of safety concerning the (conscious or unconscious) negotiation of identity.

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<sup>8</sup> The origin of the COVID-19 outbreak was traced back to Wuhan, China. Partially due to early reports naming the disease the "Chinese Virus" or the "Wuhan Virus" and other forms of media framing, Chinese people and people with traditionally East Asian looks are associated with the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic (Tessler, Choi & Kao, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> The scholars define "vocational identity" as: "how people negotiate and align their personality with an occupation's norms and practices or, more precisely, as the fit between an individual's perception of the occupational world and his or her self-perception" (Klotz et al., 2014, p. 4).

Thirdly, the importance of this thesis' study from a feminist perspective should be stressed. As will be explained in the theoretical framework, safety within educational spaces is inextricably linked to power relations (see section 1.1.1). In brief, people in powerful positions often comply with societal normative standards. Therefore, the 'standard' powerful person is white, male, cisgender, able-bodied and straight, also at STC Group<sup>10</sup>. This normativity invokes a non-neutral image of a student at STC, which leads to injustice for people not meeting these standards. The injustice, inequality and problematic consequences of power relations are exactly topics relevant within the context of gender studies, in which we are encouraged to unpack and dismantle power structures impacting how, where and by whom knowledge is created. It is important to build a bridge between STC as an educational space still dominated by patriarchal and hierarchical habits and norms, and the academic gender studies space that allows for the recognition, analysis and knockdown of these habits and norms<sup>11</sup>.

Certainly, the topic of this thesis is of great personal relevance. I identify with multiple marginalised groups/communities and during my internship, I got explicitly confronted with this again. When I walked through the hallways, when I was sexualized and harassed by both male employees and students, when I attended online meetings, and when I did not dare to expose (parts of) my identity: it was clear I was not perceived as 'just a regular' STC employee. This all angered me, but mostly made me worry about young(er) students (and even employees) at STC who are or feel alone in their marginalisation and injustice. Moreover, due to both my sister's and my own experiences, I know how hard it is to not fit in an educational institute and be unaccepted by peers and teachers. Hence, my personal experiences form the driving force behind this thesis, making me determined to fight educational normativity and exclusion aiming to ensure others will not have to experience similar feelings and situations.

In this thesis, new insights in the experiences of vocational students will be provided. Therefore, I will first unpack the concepts of safety and identity in relation to (vocational) educational institutes in chapter 1. Subsequently, in chapter 2, the qualitative methods used within this study will be outlined, described and justified. In chapter 3, the conducted ethnography and interviews

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<sup>10</sup> To exemplify: the majority of STC Group's executives (76%) is male and all the college directors (the directors of the smaller-scale mbo schools within STC) are male. Furthermore, in only the public side of STC Group, less than a fifth (19%) of the executives is female. The findings of a research on gender diversity within STC demonstrated that, in 2020, only 10% of the mbo students was female. However, not much further information is available on (other forms of) diversity amongst students.

<sup>11</sup> I certainly do not aim to imply that STC Group is 'bad' and the academic gender studies world is 'good'. I hope that, by building a bridge between these two educational spaces, we can learn from each other and together work on more inclusivity within educational structures.

will be analysed, and personal experiences of students at STC will be shared. Lastly, I aim to answer the research questions in the conclusion, and reflect on the state of affairs during the process of this thesis.

Finally, I should include a trigger and content warning. In this thesis, I aimed to display the experiences and opinions of stakeholders of STC Group as transparently and honestly as possible. This, unfortunately, means (stories on) racism, sexism, sexual harassment, homophobia, ableism and other forms of discrimination appear in the quotes. If you do not wish to get confronted with this content, please do not read chapter 3.

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## **Chapter 1. Theoretical framework: Key debates on safety and identity**

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To me, schools are areas of growth. Therefore, in my opinion, schools (should) stimulate and obtain professional growth amongst students in relation to the industries they educate in. Furthermore, schools (should) impact personal growth, in the sense of citizenship and adulthood, while taking individual students' needs into consideration (Reimers, 2006). The expectations coming with adulthood desire certain normative personality traits from students, which not every student possesses. During my internship at STC Group, I was confronted with an implicit image of an ideal student being male, cisgender, white, able-bodied and heterosexual (see section 3.2). This notion mirrors the normative western patriarchal idea of an ideal student, which is highly criticized from a feminist perspective (Liasidou, 2012; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Danvers, 2018). Many students I spoke with could not live up to the image, which frustrated and hurt them. Similarly, I noticed I could not live up to the image either. Moreover, some of the comments made by colleagues and managers during conversations made me feel uncomfortable and unsafe in a way that I got very self-conscious and aware of all the parts of my identity<sup>12</sup> I would certainly not show in front of these individuals. This, at least partly, made me able to experience the possible link between safety and showing or hiding (certain parts of) my identity.

Since I would not want to assume all people experience similar emotions and affects as a result from normative emotional and bodily images of students, it is important to delve into previous research on safety and identities in relation to power and exclusion. In the following paragraphs, I aim to unpack and define the dense and complex concepts on which this thesis' study is based, in order to answer the research question(s) on the relation between students' experiences of safety and showing and/or hiding (non)normative aspects of their identities. Hence, in order to understand the feelings and thoughts students have described during interviews, I should first define the analytical framework.

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<sup>12</sup> I use the term "identity" in a broad way, just as "identiteit" in Dutch is used in a broad manner; indicating one being in the world in one's own way. I will get back to this in section 1.2.1.

## **1.1 Discussing safety and educational spaces**

### 1.1.1 Safety

Admittedly, the concept of safety is dense and relative. Looking at encyclopaedias, one definition describes safety as activities: “Those activities that seek either to minimise or to eliminate hazardous conditions that can cause bodily injury” (“Safety”, 2017), and another definition describes safety as a condition: “The condition of being safe from undergoing or causing hurt, injury, or loss” (“Safety”, n.d.). Interestingly, both these sentences seem to focus on the absence of unsafety as a means to measure safety. I wonder if this means one cannot measure safety anymore as soon as it is present. In any case, the word would be short-changed if I would only simply provide two definitions and leave it at that. Because, as Möller, Hansson and Peterson (2006) stated: “safety is more than the antonym of risk” (p. 419).

Safety is often taken for granted; the experience of feeling safe is taken for granted until one starts feeling unsafe. But also safety as a word is taken for granted. As Hollnagel (2018) described: since the word “safety” is used so regularly, we automatically give meaning to it, and assume others perceive the word in the same way. We consciously and/or unconsciously think other humans and non-humans feel safe in the same way as we ourselves do. This is also why every researcher defines and measures safety using complete different standards and indicators (Nilsen et al., 2004). In this, I noticed the effects of power are often denied or forgotten.

Much research in the psychological fields has shown that perceived safety is impacted by controllability (Möller et al., 2006). This, in my eyes, makes sense; the more someone is in control of a situation, the more someone is able to impact one’s own experiences of safety. Perhaps, this sounds reasonable to me since I am a self-identifying control-freak, but perhaps also because I am a gender studies student who is taught to never underestimate the importance of power. In this thesis, I will use the concept of power denoting Foucault (1982): “If we speak of the structures or the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others” (p. 786), which means that the context-related aspect of power will not be denied (Allen, 2016): “The multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the processes which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them;...thus forming a chain or system” (Foucault, 1979, p. 92). At least from a psychological point of view, power is inextricably linked to the perception of self-efficacy and control (Gutiérrez, Oh & Gillmore, 2000). To exemplify, in their study concerning intimate partner

violence in Haiti, Gage and Hutchinson (2006) found that the partner who has control over decision making within the relationship, holds greater power than their partner. This could mean that, when one is able to influence other people's behaviour, that person's feelings of control - and thus power - are greater. In this logic, people with more power feel safer, because they are more in control over other people's behaviour.

Sensibly, the aforementioned logic would vice versa mean: less power is less control is less safety. This is obviously a reductive way to unpack these complex concepts, and I certainly do not aim to assume these few paragraphs provide a complete analysis of the social construction and experience of safety. *I* view the concept of safety as inextricably linked to power. This, to me, consequently means that people with less power, have less chance of feeling safe. Furthermore, safety seems to not exist in a material or concrete manner, which makes it a relative concept. This also means that it is impossible for one to tell if someone else's feelings of (un)safety are 'real', since they differ per person (Westerhoff, 2011). Therefore, in this thesis' study, every feeling of unsafety or safety is perceived as valid.

### 1.1.2 Safe spaces

In relation to safety and identity, safe spaces are important. The term 'safe space' is often used in activist, academic and educational contexts (The Roestone Collective, 2014). The concept has mainly evolved around the aim to increase safety for oppressed and marginalised groups, although the exact origins of the concept seem unclear (Ali, 2017). Just like safety is a relative term, the definition of a safe space can also differ per individual. As Poynter and Tubbs (2008) describe, a safe space would include respect, confidentiality and room for an open dialogue. In another research, the word "acceptance" was of importance to the interviewees, and safe spaces "were described as providing a kind of freedom to 'be yourself', to speak and be heard, to learn and develop cognitively, to be emotionally expressive." (Lewis, Sharp, Remnant & Redpath, 2015, p. 7).

Certainly, it should be acknowledged that the concept of safe spaces assumably mostly derives from the idea to offer a literal safe space for queer, lesbian, gay, transgender, intersex and bisexual people, to protect them/us from harassment and violence (The Roestone Collective, 2014). In this thesis, I will refer to safe spaces in a broader sense, while remembering the possible origins of the concept. This is, as I aim to include other marginalised groups (such as people of colour and people with disabilities), people part of the LGBTQIA+ community who are discriminated on the basis of intersections with other aspects of their identities, and even students who fit 'the norm' at school, as well. Therefore, in this thesis, I will argue that schools

have the responsibility to be safe spaces, or at least *safer* spaces, for all students, providing data demonstrating the effects of a school not being a safe space.

### 1.1.3 Schools and classrooms as safe spaces

Schools as safe spaces have been a popular topic of discussion for several years. Educational institutes embraced the term and seem to aim to establish safer environments for their students (Stengel & Weems, 2010). Although it is debatable whether schools should adopt terms that were presumably initially meant to support the LGBTQIA+ community, it seems in any case needed for schools to improve safety in and outside their classrooms, and it would be beneficial if this term would support this process. Previous studies demonstrated that (emotionally) unsafe conditions cause an increase in school absences, stress, and less commitment to learning in general (Shean, & Mander, 2020). Learning environments need support and respect for all students in order to obtain emotional safety. (Shean, & Mander, 2020). As bell hooks (1994) confirmed: “Seeing the classroom always as a communal place enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community” (p. 8). Assumably, when schools seem to recognise their classrooms as communal places, they start to recognise and acknowledge the importance of their classrooms as safe spaces.

Although many studies pop up regarding professors’ and schools’ perspectives on educational safe spaces, not much research was conducted on students’ perspectives on this subject (Quiros, Kay & Montijo, 2012). In order to understand the value of classrooms as safe environments, more information should be gathered on students’ needs in this area. As became apparent in the research of Holley and Steiner (2005), students can perfectly explain why a safe classroom is of importance for their learning processes and can sum up a broad variety of assets that positively affect the safety of learning spaces. The students themselves directly notice the negative effects and emotions resulting from unsafe environments<sup>13</sup>. Hence, with this thesis I hope to contribute to the acknowledgement of voices of students within the broader discussion of schools and classrooms as safe spaces.

To frame the theories within this study properly, I should also delve into previous studies on *vocational* education. Regarding vocational education, specific sectors, connotations and cultures are of impact, due to the practical character of this type of education<sup>14</sup>. The limited

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<sup>13</sup> As do teachers, understandably.

<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the sectors in which, for example, STC operates are of undeniable impact on the culture within STC Group. The scope of this thesis, however, does not allow for a thorough analysis of the, for example, patriarchal and western norms that dominate sectors in which vocational educational institutes educate.

amount of literature available on safety in vocational education mostly focuses on physical safety and risk prevention. For example, Andersson, Gunnarsson, Rosèn and Åberg (2014) conducted research on vocational pupils' experiences and knowledge regarding risks, and poignantly summarised how work-related accidents and unsafe situations are deemed normal amongst young people, since they occur so often. Young people furthermore tend to not complain about the incidents because they are afraid to be perceived as immature by others (Breslin, Polzer, MacEachen, Morrongiello & Shannon, 2007). In any case, the low awareness amongst vocational students on their ability to take measures against unsafety is alarming, considering the great extent to which students' perception of risk and behaviour are impacted by their experiences regarding professional safety (Andersson et al., 2014).

#### 1.1.4 How does unsafety lead to the inexpression of identities?

The research question of this thesis evolves around the relation between safety and students' behaviour regarding showing and/or hiding aspects of their identities. In section 1.2.1, I will aim to unpack the concept of "identity". However, I should first explain why I have chosen to highlight the link between safety and identity within an educational institute, apart from the conducted interviews that inspired me for the topic of this thesis.

To put it simply: much research confirms the idea that identity formation is affected by one's perception of safety. Shean and Mander (2020) stated: "Emotionally safe environments are related to more positive identity development, better learning experiences and greater feelings of worth" (p. 225). Furthermore, Heffernan, Kaplan, Peterson and Newton (2017) argued schools should promote the sense of safety, with the aim to alleviate resistance and apprehension with regards to identity exploration. Moreover, not only does the concept of safety come across in literature regarding development in terms of identity, also more (seemingly) tangible forms of safety have impact on this development. For example, social support in terms of interpersonal relationships can function as a source of safety and comfort to stages of identity formation (Para, 2008). In chapter 3, I will explore which aspects of safety seem to impact the students at STC Group when it comes to their identities.

## **1.2. Discussing (the visibility of) identities**

### 1.2.1 Identity

Identity. The self. Or, in Dutch: “Identiteit”. Until I submerged myself in the world of gender studies, I did not think about the implications and density of identity. Perhaps I took the word, just like (the concept of) safety, for granted, and perhaps I assumed it meant the same to everyone. I do not consider identity to be a fixed or stable term anymore. Postmodern studies confirm this idea and perceive identity and “the self” as socially constructed and affected by discursive practices (Schrag, 1997). In this, I evidently should mention Foucault (1980), who (at least partly) gave rise to postmodernism by exploring and defining the relation between power and knowledge. Consequently, Foucault rejected identity as a metaphysical concept, and recognised it as a political concept indispensable in the power structures in which we exist (Oksala, 1998).

Taking the concept of identity to another ‘level’, Butler (1988) views identity as an object of belief that is retroactively produced by our own performances, meaning that our actions precede the construction of our (illusional) identities. Additionally, reflecting on Butler’s ideas concerning the self, Darling (2012) wrote: “Because this self is born into social and linguistic structures that are always already articulating that self, the layers of narrative continue to build one upon another in the continual making of its stories” (p. 49). Therefore, I should acknowledge that identity does not pre-exist; it is connected to social structures. Factors such as structures and language co-construct identity, which makes it an ‘unrigid’/flexible concept.

By viewing identity as performative and as a process, Butler also highlights the limitations of identity categories. Although the categories can be useful for political action, identity categories are caused by suppression and exclusion, and imposes expectations and repetitive behaviour (Butler, 1990). We, humans, tend to see parts of identities as separate; we tend to see someone as, for example: female + black + cisgender + heterosexual + atheist. However, aspects of identities are actually intertwined; they interact and intersect and affect one’s social position. From that intersectional perspective, it is important to see someone as, for example: female x black x cisgender x heterosexual x atheist. Therefore, I (mostly implicitly) utilise and define the concept of intersectionality as the interaction of various identities and understandings of subjection and exclusion (Davis, 2008). By applying an intersectional approach, I aim to unpack differences and structures to the greatest extent, which would be helpful when seeking to understand phenomena like discrimination, exclusion and unsafety.

### 1.2.2 Identity formation in education

As Oksala (1998) stated: “Without social recognition, there is no identity” (p. 40). Through traditional cultural behavioural standards (e.g., rules, norms and values) identities are formed, which means they are dependent and fluid. The impact of culture is thus undeniable and defines what is accepted and what is not (Xie & Peng, 2018), which also means that educational cultures and settings play a role in identity formation (Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006). Educational settings are affected by multiple factors such as teachers, (interaction with) other students, motivation and learning, and the school as a broader context (Kaplan & Flum, 2012). These settings can differ per educational institute, and the impact per factor can differ per individual. Therefore, it is important to carefully listen to the voices of students who can teach us in what way they feel like their identities are affected by which factors, especially when it concerns voices of (young) people that have been ignored due to (systemic) oppression (Rose & Shevlin, 2004).

### 1.2.3 Non-visible identities – visible identities

When it comes to identities, one can distinguish ostensibly visible and non-visible (aspects of) identities. For example, my sister has albinism, a genetic disorder characterised by complete absence of pigment in the skin, hair and eyes, which means her disability is (often) immediately visible to others. In contrast, I am bisexual/pansexual/queer, which is a part of my identity not directly visible to others<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, we tend to think we can *see* people’s gender identity<sup>16</sup>. This demonstrates that “visibility is both the means of segregating and oppressing human groups and the means of manifesting unity and resistance” (Alcoff, 2005, p. 7).

Nevertheless, the (in)visibility of identities could be interpreted in many different ways. One of them is the way in which some identities and/or marginalised groups are literally invisible, due to structural oppression. For example, Noble (2013) found that Google searches on “Black girls” provided very limited results that caused parts of black girls’ and women’s lives, such as economic and social aspects, to be largely invisible online. The Google results that *were* provided were hypersexualized and stereotypical. Another example of invisible identities, that affects me personally, concerns siblings of children with a disability. As Naylor and Prescott (2004) stated, increasing research is conducted on children with a disability (although far from

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<sup>15</sup> Ironically, when I was texting with my interviewee Diana, a bisexual man, the topic of sexuality came up (as will be explained in Appendix C). When I told him I am bi/pan/queer, he stated: “That I knew already. Well, I was guessing lesbian actually, but close enough. It also suits your studies. It’s easy to see with people of the opposite gender, to be honest. Yours was a dead giveaway.” Thus, apparently, according to some people, my sexuality is not as invisible as I think.

<sup>16</sup> For example, we tend to think that, when someone has boobs, that person is a woman.

enough), but the needs of and (emotional) implications for non-disabled siblings of children with a disability often seem to be forgotten and under-researched. Thus, in some contexts, some identities are less visible than others, which is not necessarily linked to the literal physical visibility of the identities it concerns, but more to oppressive and power-related structures.

Hence, I need to be careful with labelling certain (parts of) identities as visible and others as invisible. As stated before, we cannot assume one's identity is based upon one's appearance. Moreover, certain parts of identities are more visible than others. However, this distinction between 'more' and 'less' visibility can lead to severe forms of discrimination. When it comes to the intersections of aspects of humans' identities, the notions of discrimination based on race, physical appearance and/or skin colour play an undeniable role. Considering manifestations connected to these different forms of discrimination have frequently come across during interviews with participants of this thesis' study, I wish to define racism, colourism and (neo-)colonial racism in the following sections.

Racism is an extremely complex and emotionally and politically-charged concept which cannot be unpacked in a few sentences. In the context of this thesis, I refer to the intersectional approach of Gloria Wekker (2016), in which racism would be defined as the discrimination of individuals or groups on the basis of race, intersecting with discrimination on the basis of, for example, nationality, skin colour, gender, and age. However, ensuring racism is not seen as a solely personal issue, but as a social-political matter of power resulting from greater societal structures (Van den Enden, 2020), I will also hold on to the definition of George Fredrickson (2002): "Racism exists when one ethnic group or historical collectivity dominates, excludes, or seeks to eliminate another on the basis of differences that it believes are hereditary and unalterable" (p. 170). Furthermore, racism must be distinguished from colourism, the latter being the different ways in which 'same-race people' are discriminated based on skin colour and its constructed sociocultural meanings (Walker, 1983).

Furthermore, (neo-)colonial racism, being a subgroup of racism, should be defined. That is, as many young people from the Caribbean area come to study at STC Group (and therefore identify as foreign students). Because Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Sint Maarten, Sint Eustatius and Saba were colonised by The Netherlands from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the mid-twentieth century (Oostindie & Klinkers, 2003), Caribbean students often speak Dutch as their second language. Neo-colonialism involves "the oppression of people, the exploitation of their labour and resources, and the acquisition of wealth and power by the colonizer", stems "from a belief that the [ex-]colonizers are superior to the [ex-]colonized" (Jackson, 2009, p. 162) and is linked

to a history of colonialization. This means that western countries (e.g., The Netherlands) imposing their ideas and impact on former by-them-colonialised countries (e.g., islands in the Caribbean area), are engaging in neo-colonialism. Therefore, it is important to indicate the observed forms of racism at STC Group are inextricably linked to neo-colonialism<sup>17</sup>, and could thus possibly be called “neo-colonial racism”.

#### 1.2.4 Making (parts of) identities visible

Certain (parts of) identities are invisible to others. This means that people (identifying) with these non-visible identities can – unconsciously and/or consciously – decide to make these parts visible, by showing them. People with visible identities can nuance and diminish these aspects, by hiding them. A good recent example of a study in the first ‘category’ is from Davila, Feinstein, Dyar and Jabbour (2021), and concerns the attempts of bisexual+<sup>18</sup> people to make their sexual identity visible. The scholars found that safety due to the individuals being surrounded with people similar to them, made bisexual+ people more likely to make “visibility attempts”. Although the study suggests more research is needed on this finding, it at least indicates a link between safety and showing parts of one’s identity. Regarding the second ‘category’, Hallberg, Klingberg, Setsaa and Möller Anders (2010) studied teenagers diagnosed with ADHD<sup>19</sup>, who hid parts of themselves from others. On the circumstances impacting the hiding behaviour of these teenagers, the scholars wrote: “They felt comfortable and satisfied in their families, but at school and together with their reference groups or their schoolmates they did their utmost to ‘fit in’ and be just like everybody else by hiding parts of themselves” (Hallberg et al., 2010, para. 17). In both aforementioned cases, it seems evident that societal and emotional circumstances affect people’s behaviour when it comes to showing and/or hiding parts of their identities.

The ‘act’ of showing or hiding aspects of one’s identity can also be referred to as “identity negotiation”. As Ting-Toomey (2015) explains: “The identity negotiation theory concerns the importance of negotiating sociocultural membership identity and personal identity issues in intercultural and interpersonal communication settings” (p. 1). This negotiation can regard

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<sup>17</sup> Even more so due to the role of ships at the educational institute, which played a fundamental role in the colonial history of The Netherlands. Unfortunately, the scope of this thesis does not allow for a deeper analysis of this notion.

<sup>18</sup> The scholars used “bisexual+” in their article “as an umbrella term that includes all individuals who report attractions to more than one gender, regardless of the specific sexual identity label they use (e.g., bisexual, pansexual, omnisexual, polysexual, queer)” (Davila et al., 2021, p. 94).

<sup>19</sup> Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a condition that usually affects people’s (social) behaviour (Masuch, Bea, Alm, Deibler & Sobanski, 2019).

entire aspects of one's identity, but also 'smaller' traits that are part of a bigger aspect. For example, people can negotiate their masculinity (Gill, Teese & Sonn, 2014), meaning that one (consciously or unconsciously) decides to show or hide traditionally masculine aspects of their identity, which is especially interesting and of importance in the case of STC Group<sup>20</sup>. But, not only can identity negotiation evolve around one certain part of one's identity, it can also concern multiple aspects of one's identity, intersecting with each other. This became specifically apparent in a study concerning black-white biracial lesbian women's identity issues and conflicts, also showing the negotiation could lead to severe feelings of alienation, disorientation and anxiety (Bing, 2004). It is therefore, in any case, important to approach the process of, either conscious or unconscious, identity negotiation carefully, taking the context, social implications, and vulnerability of individuals into account.

Now that the connection between the dense concepts of safety, safe spaces and (the visibility and negotiation of) identity is made and explained, I will be able to connect the theoretical, and sometimes abstract, texts to the more practical vocational context of STC. The explored concepts will help in understanding the experiences of students at STC Group and answer the research questions of this study. Before that, I will introduce the methodologies used for my research analysis.

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<sup>20</sup> This will be further explained in chapter 3.

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## **Chapter 2. Methodology: Considerations for the collection of experiences**

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### **2.1 Introduction to methods**

My personal aim of this study is to let voices of students in Dutch vocational education be heard. In my experience, vocational students are often forgotten in academic research, and to me, it goes without saying the concepts of safety and identity are of importance for every person. As became clear in the previous chapter, educational contexts affect the ways in which students behave and feel, and this thesis' study should provide an insight in vocational students' perspectives on the issues of safety and identity.

Since I want my texts to encourage as many people<sup>21</sup> as possible to address and tackle issues regarding diversity and inclusivity, I aimed to write this thesis in an understandable manner and use as little jargon as possible. Because, as bell hooks (1991) argued: "one of the many uses of theory in academic locations is in the production of an intellectual class hierarchy where the only work deemed truly theoretical is work that is highly abstract, jargonistic, difficult to read, and containing obscure references that may not be at all clear or explained" (p. 4). I write about discrimination and exclusion, and I thus do not wish to contribute to "an intellectual class hierarchy" by using inaccessible and incomprehensible language.

In order to answer my research question and analyse STC Group as a case study, qualitative research was conducted. As Lykke (2010) described, in the fields of social sciences and humanities, qualitative methods have dominated in feminist research. Moreover, as Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2020) described, qualitative methods allow for a deeper analysis of opinions, behaviour, emotions and beliefs. Furthermore, feminists listen to the experiences of others, and perceive other people's manifestations as valid knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2011). Qualitative feminist research is thus appropriate in this case, as it leaves room for voices of people that are not (often) heard and for a detailed expression of personal experiences, which provides us with substantial details, context and nuances (Hennink et al., 2020).

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<sup>21</sup> Also people who did not necessarily have an academic background, let alone a background in gender studies.

## **2.2 Description of methods**

My entire internship could be perceived as action research. Action research is a methodology that aims to establish transformative change by doing research and simultaneously stimulating action, by engaging in critical reflection (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000). Under the heading of action research, I conducted interviews with students, had conversations with colleagues, attended meetings, had in-class conversations with students, gave presentations on gender and inclusivity, read (diversity) policy documents of both STC and other educational institutes, and analysed all the gathered information. In the following paragraphs, I elaborate on the two methods that mostly provided me with data for this thesis' study: ethnographic research and feminist interviews.

### 2.2.1 Ethnographic research

First of all, ethnographic research was of importance before, during and after my internship and study, as ethnography provided me with observations, feelings and a sense of culture within STC Group. Ethnography can be defined as: "A family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms, the irreducibility of human experience" (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 5). Building on this definition, I observed, recorded, and analysed human behaviour and structures; I have been in close social contact with stakeholders of STC Group, aiming to thoroughly analyse the internal safety at the organisation.

To me, the observational part of ethnography is of great worth. It allows me to 'feel' the culture and get acquainted with the organisational knowledge (in as far as I am able to understand what others know and feel). As an outsider, it already takes long to understand an organisation's structure, being the shared understanding of habits, norms and social values, which makes it even harder to get to know the culture and normative behaviour within a company (Gherardi, 2006). Observing and questioning over 50 employees as part of my ethnographic research for STC, enabled me to understand and analyse the internal culture of STC and the answers given by students during interviews, which is valuable for this thesis' study.

### 2.2.2 Feminist interviews

Apart from the approximately 50 meetings I had with employees at various levels of the company, I conducted interviews with 12 mbo students and held in-class discussions with more than 90 students at STC Group. This thesis mostly evolves around the in-depth interviews I

conducted with 12 interviewees<sup>22</sup>. As Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2020) stated, in-depth interviews enable us to gain insight into for example, “in-depth information on sensitive issues”, “the motivation for certain behaviours”, “the personal story of a participant” and “the meaning people attach to experiences” (p. 117). The latter is especially important to this study, as it tells us how students experience and are affected by safety and identity negotiation. Moreover, many scholars have already proven the value of listening to young marginalised individuals’ voices, such as Rose and Shevlin (2004), who demonstrated how students’ educational experiences, learning (behaviour) and feelings of inclusion are affected by educational procedures and behaviour of others.

In this study, I have chosen to conduct semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews usually involve several key questions evolving around the main topics the interviewer aims to discuss (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008). The list of 18 key questions (Appendix A) offers guidance and ensures the main topics are discussed. Nevertheless, this method also leaves room for unexpected topics to enter the interview and for extensive explanations of questions and answers, which could lead to more detailed insights (Gill et al., 2008). Although closed questions often seem less useful in interviews, I deliberately also included closed questions in the interview, since the semi-structure of the interviews allowed me to continue probing and ask follow-up questions such as “Why is that?” and “Could you explain or elaborate on your answer?” (Newcomer, Hatry & Wholey, 2015). I aimed to use the flexibility of this structure to benefit the results of the interviews.

In order to identify participants for the one-on-one interviews, I asked course programme managers at STC to distribute an e-mail drawn up by me amongst their students (Appendix B), asking them to contact me if they were willing to participate as an interviewee in my research. In the e-mail I explained the aim and main topics of the study, and indicated an interview would require the interviewee to talk about sensitive subjects such as discrimination, safety and diversity. The e-mail was spread amongst an estimated 900 hundred students and six students contacted me accordingly<sup>23</sup>. Two students contacted me after another interviewee told them about my research. Furthermore, a student-counsellor at STC Group, who guides students who come from the Caribbean to study at STC in The Netherlands, offered to contact a few of her students to ask if they were willing to participate. This was helpful, as it was hard to compile a

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<sup>22</sup> However, the in-class conversations and staff meetings will be referred to when applicable.

<sup>23</sup> The scope of this thesis does not allow for an analysis on the relative low response rate. This, however, would certainly be worth examining, since it perhaps tells me something about, for example, the importance of the topics for the students, their hesitance regarding the topics, or the degree to which they read their emails.

diverse ‘sample’ due to the homogeneous student population at STC. Therefore, the four foreign<sup>24</sup> students of colour from the Caribbean area, of which two women and two men, raised the cultural diversity, as was undoubtedly necessary within my ‘sample’.

Naturally, I obtained informed consent of all the participating students. When a student indicated to be interested in participating in an interview, I e-mailed them to plan an interview on their terms and at their desired time and day. Furthermore, I asked them if they would be ‘okay’ with me recording our conversation. I ensured the students the study would comply with privacy regulations (GDPR) and I would only record the interview in order to be able to listen carefully during the interview and take notes afterwards. It was important to make sure the participants were informed about the state of affairs and sensitivity of the subjects, in order to ensure they would not be taken by surprise by anything (McCormick, 2012).

At the beginning of each interview, I again asked if the interviewee was truly agreeing on me recording the interview. Subsequently, I introduced myself and the research, aiming to disclose parts of myself and break the ice. Thereafter, I asked them to tell something about themselves. I deliberately did not ask them specifically about certain aspects of their identity, as I wanted the interviewees to only share parts of themselves they wanted to share, which is something I also tried to carry out throughout the rest of the interview. This, however, also led to me knowing many details about some of the interviewees, and knowing very little about other interviewees’ personal life. Nevertheless, the degree to which one shares personal information at the beginning of an interview, also reveals something about that person.

The interview length differed per student. Some interviews lasted 20 minutes, some more than one hour. I caught myself being afraid the shorter interviews would be of less value. However, it appeared that the length of an interview did not reflect the quality of an interview. It was my personal criticism and perfectionism that got in the way at these moments. Furthermore, I was specifically looking for people’s experiences with regards to safety, discrimination and identity negotiation, and if a student indicated they feel very safe and had never experienced discrimination, I sometimes felt like the interview did not provide the ‘right’ information. For example, when a student would make racist and sexist comments, I deemed it less useful as it did not provide me with direct experiences regarding unsafety and discrimination. Subsequently, I needed to remind myself it were exactly those students making derogatory comments who created an unsafe environment and who proved my assumptions regarding the

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<sup>24</sup> The Caribbean students I interviewed identified as foreign students themselves.

exclusion of non-normative students at STC. Therefore, I eventually did find much value in these more dominant and normative perspectives, and quickly took back the idea that the information would be less worthy. In retrospect, my criticism was also due to the tension between the action research<sup>25</sup> required for STC Group, which particularly made me look for practical ways to address and improve the internal emotional safety at school, and the search for the link with identity negotiation for my thesis. One could thus say that I was wearing two hats during the interviews, which complicated my expectations from the conversations.

## **2.3 Limitations of methods**

Of course, internal and external factors affected the used methodologies and their results. Some of these limiting influential factors are outlined below.

### 2.3.1 COVID-19

Almost all the interviews and conversations were held online via Microsoft Teams (only two took place face-to-face) due to the COVID-19 measures not allowing for interviews at the locations of STC Group. Luckily, I was still able to have in-class discussions with four classes ‘in real life’. Hence, not all interviews were held in the same setting, and online communication differs undeniably from offline communication (James & Busher, 2016), meaning the results were directly impacted by COVID-19.

Furthermore, the lessons still mainly took place online, which caused different dynamics among the students and between teachers and students. As such, COVID-19 also indirectly affected the results of the methodology, due to the deep emotional effects of the long-term isolation caused by the pandemic. For example, since burdens in general are structurally gendered, scholars are particularly concerned with the impacts on the wellbeing of and societal consequences for people who are not cisgender men, due to the direct impacts on, for example, mental health, domestic violence and division of labour within the home (Bahn, Cohen & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2020). Thus, it must be acknowledged that COVID-19 undeniably impacted all parties concerned and the results of my research and internship both directly and indirectly.

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<sup>25</sup> My main internship tasks included doing interviews with students, having in-class conversations with students, talking to colleagues, attending meetings, and analysing all this input. All of this was done in order to draw up an advice for STC Group to support them in preparing a diversity policy and to help developing a plan to increase the internal inclusivity and social safety, which is why, as said before, my entire internship could be perceived as action research.

### 2.3.2 Language and translation

It goes without saying that language has been of influence in multiple ways. For example, when I started conducting the interviews, one of my questions was: “What does inclusivity mean to you?” Many students had never heard of “inclusivity”, and asked me to define it, whereas I actually wanted them to define it for me. Retrospectively, I feel naïve for not considering the possible difference between our vocabulary within this particular question. However, I did not want to underestimate the students either, and I thus did include the question. Fortunately, the other questions did come across as hoped.

Furthermore, eleven out of the 12 one-on-one interviews were conducted in Dutch, meaning almost all the quotes in the analysis are translated. As many feminist scholars have already stated, translation is a complicated issue. For example, contemporary writing allows for feminist consciousness, and it is therefore even more feasible for translators to allow themselves to interfere, supplement and experiment in the texts they write (Von Flotow, 1991). In order to do justice to the quotes and experiences of the interviewees, I translated the quotes as carefully as possible to ensure their stories are read and understood in the way I think they were implied. To be transparent, the original and complete Dutch quotes are included in the footnotes, following the name of the particular interviewee<sup>26</sup>.

### 2.3.3 Power relations in research

As Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (2011) described, when conducting (feminist) research, the power relations (as described by Foucault, see section 1.1.1) between the researcher/interviewer and the researched/interviewees are of great importance. Therefore, the researcher should be conscious of and reflect on the present power relations and the researcher’s position(ality) (Haraway, 1988). Although all the people I spoke with were stakeholders of STC Group who knew about the purpose of my research, some issues ask me to critically reflect on ethical considerations. Primarily, I wonder if it was ethical to conduct sensitive interviews via Microsoft Teams. Furthermore, I spoke with marginalised individuals and asked them about their experiences of discrimination, while not being able to offer them anything in return. The ‘return’ would be my promise to carefully and confidentially incorporate their experiences in my report with the aim to convince STC Group to work on their internal safety and inclusivity

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<sup>26</sup> One interview, with Anne, was conducted in English. This made it, at the beginning, odd for me to suddenly refer to all the STC-related issues in English, but it, in the end, made it much easier to use the interview for my thesis’ analysis, as the word-use of Anne provided very valuable quotes already in English. Thus, for the quotes of Anne, no Dutch translation will be provided in the footnotes.

and in my thesis hoping their stories would be heard. The question is if this was enough, especially when taking the circumstances into account.

Lastly, during conversations and interviews with students, I evidently attempted to create a safe space for my interviewees, especially because it concerned educational institutions (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019) and to establish rapport between the interviewees (the students) and the interviewer (myself) (Gill, et al., 2008). This was essential, mainly because of the instinctive distance often present at the beginning of the interviews<sup>27</sup>. I therefore emphasised I was also ‘just a student’, ensuring I was not condescending to the interviewees in any way.

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<sup>27</sup> For example, some students addressed me using “u” (“vous”, in French), the formal mode of address, instead of “jij” (“tu”). Since I was aware of the power differences already existent, I aimed to narrow the power-related gap as much as possible, by, for example, immediately asking the interviewees to address me using “jij” (also because the interviewees and I were often about the same age).

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## **Chapter 3. Analysis: Towards an understanding of the experiences**

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Before I aim to understand students' behaviours and attitudes regarding identity negotiation, I will describe students' perceptions of safety within their school (section 3.1). That is, as the key debates reviewed in the theoretical framework recognised a direct link between safety and identity negotiation. After displaying students' stories on safety, the assumed desired identity (with respect to looks, emotions and behaviour) of a STC-student can be put into context, demonstrating the 'ideal' image students might want to live up to (section 3.2), which can lead to the act of hiding or showing certain parts of their identities. Subsequently, the internalisation of issues within (the students and employees of) STC Group will be analysed (section 3.3), showing the serious nature of problems caused by unsafety and normative identities. To avoid any confusion, in this thesis, spoken quotes are indicated in italics; written quotes are not.

Please refer to Appendix C to see the introduction of the interviewees, Daan, Diana, Anne, Tommy, Joshua, Emma, Dean, Mia, Max, Jess, Laura and Aletta. The short paragraphs on their personal backgrounds provide an important context to their quotes, experiences, feelings, and opinions.

### **3.1 (Basic) safety**

During my internship at STC Group, I had many conversations on safety. When delving into the data of the conducted interviews, multiple things were remarkable regarding this topic. When I asked students if they felt safe within the school, nine out of 12 students immediately responded with "Yes". Their determination and rapidity quite immediately reminded me of Hollnagel (2018) describing that people often take the word "safety" for granted. However, in response to supplementary questions, it appeared that students were mostly enthusiastic about the *physical* safety at school. The students at STC seemed to define safety in a more narrow sense. In that sense, safety would entail: "the absence of harm or injury that can be experienced by any person from a physical object or practices that include a physical object. Physical objects

can include a person, the room itself, furniture, medical equipment, prohibited items, toys, art work, etc.” (*What is Physical Safety?*, n.d.). This is evidenced by the answers given by students, as can be seen in Image 1<sup>28</sup>. The students needed more in-depth questions to link the concept of safety to emotional/social/social-emotional safety<sup>29</sup>.

**Joshua:** “*I feel safe at school, everything goes very much according to the rules.*”

**Max:** “*Yes, I feel safe. We just have janitors, they take their job very seriously. They ensure that you keep your distance and that people wear face masks, et cetera.*”

**Daan:** “*Who’s going to hurt me? Hahaha. Yes, I feel very safe. Why wouldn’t I feel safe? No, it’s definitely safe. But more in a general sense. The building will not collapse.*”

Image 1

### 3.1.1 Safety and gender

**Jess:** “*When I was a first-year student, there was a fourth-year male student... Everywhere I went he stood around the corner. He looked at me all the time. (...) Sometimes, he would stand behind the window of my classroom and looked inside. That was really not nice. I felt really unsafe during that time.*”

The three students not so determined to answer “Yes” to my question, were women. In general, many female students and employees of STC Group indicated they feel unsafe within the building(s) of their school. For example, many women are stared and whistled at when they walk down the hallways. Although many stakeholders perceive this as innocent behaviour, it may also lead to feelings of unsafety, especially when it regards obsessive behaviour (see Image 2<sup>30</sup>).

Image 2

<sup>28</sup> Joshua: “*Ik voel me veilig op school, alles gaat heel erg volgens de regels.*”

Max: “*Ja, ik voel me veilig. We hebben gewoon conciërges, die nemen hun taak heel serieus. Ze zorgen ervoor dat iedereen afstand houdt en mensen mondkapjes dragen, et cetera.*”

Daan: “*Wie gaat mij iets doen? Hahaha. Ja hoor, ik voel me hartstikke veilig. Waardoor kan ik me niet veilig voelen? Nee, veilig is het sowieso. Maar meer in de algemene zin. Het gebouw stort niet in.*”

<sup>29</sup> I use these terms interchangeably, referring to the concept of an emotionally safe school defined by Shean & Mander (2020): “An emotionally safe school is one where there are systems and structures that provide boundaries and self-worth in students; which results in the students feeling connected, respected and valued; and through those feelings they are able to fully engage in relationships and learning, and express their true self.” (p. 229).

<sup>30</sup> Jess: “*Toen ik in het eerste jaar zat, zat er een jongen in het vierde jaar. Overal waar ik liep stond hij om het hoekje. En dan keek hij de hele tijd naar mij. Soms liep ik langs en zei ik: ‘Hey, wil je dit niet meer doen?’, maar dan bleef hij het toch doen. Soms ging hij voor mijn lokaal staan en naar binnen kijken. Dat was echt niet fijn. Toen voelde ik me wel echt onveilig.*”

Not only did *students* elaborate upon distressful situations which they encountered at STC, female *employees* also encountered unsafe situations. For example, an employee told me she received private messages from students, and was harassed by a student in her own office “*out of interest*”<sup>31</sup>. She reported this to a manager, but no action was taken. The employee, poignantly, indicated she now bases her choice of clothing on these previous experiences. Her feeling of unsafety thus directly affected her identity negotiation at work, which makes sense when recognizing an emotionally safe environment as an important factor in identity building and exploration (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca & Ritchie, 2013).

Furthermore, not only are female stakeholders’ experiences regarding safety negatively impacted by the behaviour of male *students*, also staff, management and teachers make a contribution. Employees declared the female body is frequently subject of jokes and also students I spoke with during the interviews came forward with shocking information about their teachers. For example, Aletta told me rumours circulate concerning a mentor who allegedly had sex with students, including a girl who, he knew, had a depression. Aletta indicated the teacher is also touchy with her and other students. He does not touch her in intimate places<sup>32</sup>, but always puts a hand on her shoulder or back for too long. In addition, the respective teacher makes remarks making students feel uncomfortable. For example, during an online class, when a student jokingly said, “*Sir, I’m taking a shower,*”<sup>33</sup> the teacher responded with, “*Oh, turn on your camera.*”<sup>34</sup> Aletta indicated she never discussed her experiences and the rumours with any employee from STC. She said that, as a student, it is difficult to express oneself to and about a teacher, because of the dependence on teachers when it comes to grades and moving on to the next year. As stated before, sense of safety is impacted by controllability (Möller et al., 2006). In this case, the teacher is clearly in control, and Aletta is not, which enhances her feelings of unsafety.

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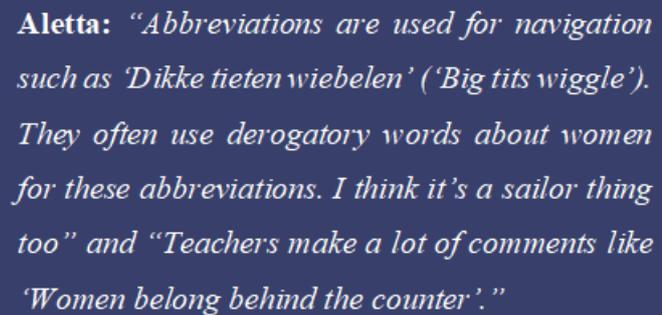
<sup>31</sup> Employee: “*Onder het mom van interesse.*”

<sup>32</sup> This is a subjective concept, but in this case I mean bodily parts that are traditionally perceived as intimate, such as genitals, boobs, and buttocks.

<sup>33</sup> Student: “*Meneer, ik ben aan het douchen.*”

<sup>34</sup> Teacher: “*Oh, doe je camera eens aan dan.*”

The aforementioned expressions of this specific teacher are no exceptions. Students and staff gave plenty of examples of sexist comments, jokes and mnemonic devices from teachers (for example, see Image 3<sup>35</sup>). In any case, the environment of STC Group with regards to sexism is not entirely safe, and this is reflected in multiple layers of the organisation.



**Aletta:** *“Abbreviations are used for navigation such as ‘Dikke tieten wiebelen’ (‘Big tits wiggle’). They often use derogatory words about women for these abbreviations. I think it’s a sailor thing too” and “Teachers make a lot of comments like ‘Women belong behind the counter’.”*

Image 3

### 3.1.2 Safety and sexuality

The topic of sexuality<sup>36</sup> also provided me with some controversial and interesting encounters<sup>37</sup>. The importance of schools as safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ people is undeniable (The Roestone Collective, 2014), also for STC Group. However, making non-heterosexuality a topic of discussion caused discomfort amongst students during the in-class discussions. For example, when I started talking about homosexuality, most of the male students suddenly started staring out of the windows and did not seem to want a lengthy conversation on the subject. Emma also mentioned the lack of space for a gay classmate: *“Last year, there was a boy in my class who is gay, but he didn’t dare to tell our class because he didn’t feel safe enough there. I felt very bad about that.”*<sup>38</sup> Judging by the conversations I had with students and staff, I dare say this gay boy is no exception. This is problematic since previous literature has proven the importance of support and respect for *all students* in order to obtain emotional safety within learning environments (Shean & Mander, 2020).

### 3.1.3 Safety and skin colour

When asking questions regarding safety, the students of colour were amongst the people who immediately said they feel safe at school. However, it mostly took only one follow-up question for them to delve deeper into their feelings of safety. They, subsequently, bravely and vulnerably opened up with examples of experiences with racism, colourism and discomfort regarding issues related to skin colour<sup>39</sup>. Educational safety and equity are directly hampered

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<sup>35</sup> Aletta: *“Voor navigatie worden afkortingen gebruikt. Zoals ‘Dikke tieten wiebelen’. Ze gebruiken vaak denigrerende woorden over vrouwen voor deze afkortingen. Ik denk dat het een matrozen ding is ook.”*

<sup>36</sup> In this case I define sexuality as sexual and/or romantic attraction to other people or oneself.

<sup>37</sup> The manifestations of *employees* with regards to this topic will be discussed in section 3.3.2.

<sup>38</sup> Emma: *“Vorig jaar zat er een jongen in mijn klas die homo is, maar die durfde dat niet te vertellen aan de hele klas, want daar voelde hij zich niet veilig genoeg voor. Dat vond ik wel heel kwalijk.”*

<sup>39</sup> As explained in chapter 1, these experiences can be forms of racism, colourism, and neo-colonial racism. However, not every experience will be labelled as such.

by racism (Zimmerman & Astor, 2021), as it stands in the way of safety at schools, which consequently can cause an increase in school absences, stress, and less commitment to learning in general (Shean, & Mander, 2020). The racism reported during this thesis' research was mostly subtle. Students described examples of racism (see Image 4<sup>40</sup>), often encountered with teachers who already seemed to have trouble handling different cultures than their own. Moreover, it directly affected their school results and learning behaviour, and sometimes the students were even able to indicate the indirect consequences of the racism. In any case, the students did not report the encounters to their school and felt alone in their injustice.

**Laura:** *“During an exam, a teacher once said: ‘You have to sit here [in the front], because then I can keep an eye on you.’ That felt a bit strange to me. Because, I didn’t know this teacher at all, and I thought: ‘Are you saying that because I’m an Antillean, or does this apply to everyone?’ I had never had any trouble with a teacher, but this didn’t sound nice to me. I’m a really quiet girl, so I would never argue with a teacher. I just do what I’m told. And it also happened during an exam, so figured that, if I would have said something about it, he could also have said that I was not allowed to take the exam anymore. I heard from a fellow student from the Antilles that the same teacher also said something strange to him.”*

**Daan:** *“I was not allowed to see my test for a long while, and I really had to talk with a lot of people to make sure that I was allowed to; also with the course programme manager. In the end I was allowed to see the test, and when we walked through it, it turned out that five of my answers were rejected, whereas they were actually correct. One can accidentally wrongly reject one or two answers, but five is a bit too much. These kinds of things always happen with teachers who already struggle with cultural differences in the classroom.”*

**Anne:** *“Sometimes we get courses from STC-KNRM, such as Advanced Firefighting and things like that. Shortly after the Black Lives Matter movement came up, I participated in one of those courses. The subject came up and then I felt very uncomfortable. It felt a bit like black against white. There was a lot of ignorance about the subject. Things were said like ‘white lives matter’. Their opinions really took over the whole conversation and the whole space. I was the only non-white person in the room and one of the few women. I didn’t think it would be a good idea to start an argument on my own.”*

Image 4

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<sup>40</sup> Laura: *“Tijdens een examen zei een docent een keertje: ‘Jij moet hier [vooraan] zitten, want dan kan ik op jou letten.’ Dat was een beetje raar voor mij. Want ik kende deze docent helemaal niet, en ik dacht: ‘Zeg je dat nou omdat ik Antilliaan ben, of is dat bij iedereen hetzelfde?’ Ik had ook nog nooit moeite gehad met een docent, maar dit klonk niet zo leuk voor mij. Ik ben echt een rustig meisje, dus ik zou nooit ruzie maken met een docent. Ik doe gewoon wat hij zegt. En we hadden ook nog eens een examen, dus stel ik had er iets van gezegd, dan had hij ook kunnen zeggen dat ik het examen niet mocht maken. Van een medestudent uit de Antillen heb ik gehoord dat diezelfde docent ook zoiets raars gezegd heeft tegen hem.”*

Daan: *“Ik mocht steeds mijn toets maar niet inzien, en ik heb echt met heel veel mensen moeten praten om ervoor te zorgen dat dat wel mocht. Ook met de schoolmanager. Uiteindelijk mocht ik de toets wel inzien, en toen we gingen nakijken waren er vijf vragen fout gerekend die goed waren. Dat je er één of twee per ongeluk fout rekent kan nog, maar vijf is wel iets teveel. Dit soort dingen gebeuren altijd net bij de docenten die al moeite hebben met culturele verschillen in de klas.”*

### 3.2 The ideal student

Conversations with employees constantly made me feel like they had an image of a ‘standard’ STC student in mind. To exemplify, staff talked about “*the boys*”<sup>41</sup>, referred to “*the student*”<sup>42</sup> using he/him pronouns, and often directly made clear that STC is not a school for people with a disability. During the interview with Anne, she confirmed my ideas regarding the internalised image of the ideal STC student. She said she feels like STC attempts to form a very specific type of seafarers and she described seamen and the atmosphere in the building of STC as “*very black or white*”<sup>43</sup>. She explained the consequences of this notion: “*There’s no room for self-expression. And I think that’s also a bit frowned upon. I don’t think they like that [self-expression]. I’ve noticed that in classes, for example, where ex-colleagues of mine or students would think outside the box, that wasn’t really accepted in a certain way.*”

According to Anne, the desired STC student is strict and: “*Like very polished. Almost like an army brat.*” She also explained how this impacts her own behaviour: “*I do find myself being less of myself when I’m there. Like just a more polished version of myself, I would say. Less flamboyant, or just a bit square. I think the culture is very square and very preppy sometimes even. I mean, it’s not a bunch of art students*<sup>44</sup> *walking around, you know, it’s a bunch of sailors. So that’s definitely restricting in that sense.*”

Since the words of Anne confirmed my assumption, I actively started asking identity-related questions to other interviewees, assuming emotional safety is indeed related to “more positive identity development” (Shean & Mander, 2020, p. 225). I asked the students if they can completely be themselves at school, and which part of their identities they leave at home, if any. It turned out that, within STC, stakeholders seem to have very specific ideas about the desired looks (section 3.2.1), (portrayal of) emotions (section 3.2.2), and behaviour for students (section 3.2.3). Therefore, statements regarding these three ideas will be outlined in the following paragraphs.

#### 3.2.1 In terms of looks

In this paragraph I focus on the systematic expectations integrated in STC Group, inducing a desired bodily profile of the STC student.

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<sup>41</sup> Staff: “*De jongens.*”

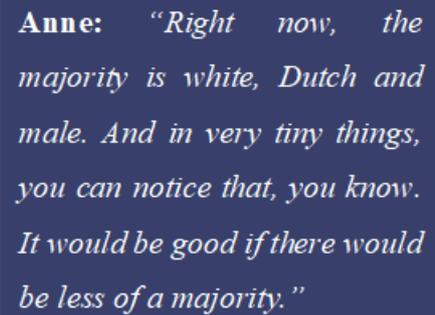
<sup>42</sup> Staff: “*De student.*”

<sup>43</sup> With “*black or white*” Anne assumably means that the seafarers in her opinion perceive things as absolutely right or wrong or as absolutely good or bad. The extremities have no grades between them.

<sup>44</sup> Assumably, Anne here refers to *her* image of a traditional (stereotypical) art student. This stereotypical art student could for example be more sensitive, articulate and imaginative (Furnham & Crump, 2013).

## Bodies

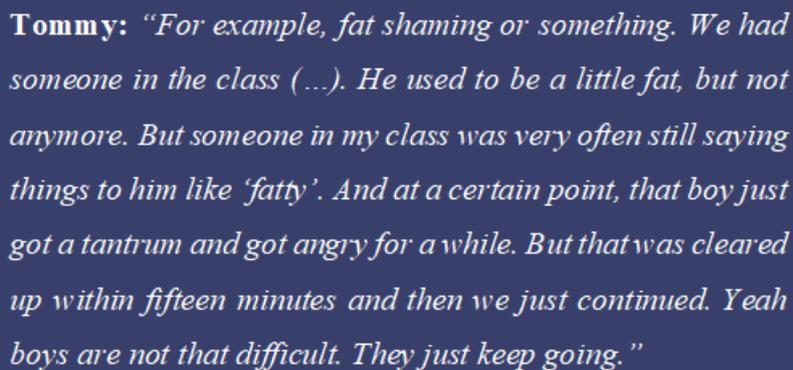
During my internship it, through multiple statements and observations, became apparent that the majority of the students is white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender and male (for example, see Image 5). In this thesis, I do not aim to focus that much on the issues that arise from the lack of diversity within the school, but more on the systematic expectations that are integrated in educational institutes, inducing a desired bodily image of the STC student.



**Anne:** *“Right now, the majority is white, Dutch and male. And in very tiny things, you can notice that, you know. It would be good if there would be less of a majority.”*

Image 5

Although there is a bathroom for disabled people combined with the bathroom for women, ableism in different forms seems to be very present within the school. Ableism can be defined as the systematically pervasive oppression (including the marginalisation, stigmatisation and discrimination) of people with (mental or physical) disabilities, privileging people who, at this point, are not disabled (Ostiguy, Peters & Shlasko, 2016). The ableism at STC is implicitly present and very explicitly vocalised. For example, a manager told me STC is “*simply*”<sup>45</sup> not a school for people with a disability, a staff member said STC’s courses are not suitable for people in a wheelchair or people who are blind, and another employee added you only see people who fit the norm within STC; no “*disabled*”<sup>46</sup> or “*gays*”<sup>47</sup>.



**Tommy:** *“For example, fat shaming or something. We had someone in the class (...). He used to be a little fat, but not anymore. But someone in my class was very often still saying things to him like ‘fatty’. And at a certain point, that boy just got a tantrum and got angry for a while. But that was cleared up within fifteen minutes and then we just continued. Yeah boys are not that difficult. They just keep going.”*

Interestingly, when I asked Tommy about his feelings of safety, he stated that it [STC] is safe. However, after this statement, he immediately gave an example of fat shaming that took place in his class (see Image 6<sup>48</sup>). Fat

Image 6

<sup>45</sup> Manager: “*Simpelweg.*”

<sup>46</sup> Employee: “*Gehandicapten.*”

<sup>47</sup> Employee: “*Homo’s.*”

<sup>48</sup> Tommy: “*Ja, het is veilig. Ik heb nooit.... Ja, af en toe heb je ruzie met mekaar. Weet je wel over voetbal ofzo, of als je bijvoorbeeld, ja, fat shaming ofzo, weet je. We hadden iemand in de klas en we zeiden heel vaak tegen die gozer... In ieder geval sommigen konden gewoon grappen maken, weet je wel. Hij was vroeger een beetje dik, maar nu niet meer, weet je wel. Maar iemand zei gewoon nog heel vaak tegen hem: ‘dikke, dikke’, elke keer. En op een gegeven moment krijgt zo’n jongen ook gewoon een woedeaanval en wordt hij even boos, maar ja, dat was ook binnen een kwartier weer uitgepraat en gaan we weer verder. Ja, jongens doen niet zo moeilijk. Die gaan gewoon weer verder. Het is niet zo dat we daar een heel ding van maken ofzo. Nee, ik voel me gewoon veilig.”*

shaming reproduces inequalities regarding race, gender and class, and depicts the prejudices rooted in hegemonic ideals, values and capitalist demands, stigmatising bodies perceived as overweight or obese (Rinaldi, 2020). Tommy's example of fat shaming shows oppressive ideals regarding weight or fat also reign within STC.

Hence, it seems like students have images in their mind of what the perfect (STC) student looks like. Similarly, teachers are not afraid to directly ventilate their preferences regarding students; see Image 7<sup>49</sup>. Comments are thus made by both teachers and students indicating their preferences with regards to STC students' looks, which demonstrates how (according to them) some students seem to not fit the bodily image of the ideal STC student, which potentially leads to students hiding parts of their identities.

**Joshua:** *"The open day for inland waterway transport took place online. A girl asked a question during the session, but then the teacher said: 'No, but this world is really a male world', insinuating that she shouldn't apply. So that girl wasn't so excited about the study anymore. The teachers should be less male-focused."*

**Aletta:** *"I regularly face discriminating comments of teachers, such as: 'You're too dumb for this programme' and 'Why are you at this school?'"*

Image 7

### Clothing

Opinions and experiences regarding clothing were often discussed during interviews with students and colleagues. For example, female stakeholders choose their clothes very consciously. Aletta described what happens when she puts on a skirt: *"Then you will be sexualised"* and *"I'm afraid I'll get pinched in my butt."*<sup>50</sup> These kinds of statements apply not only to short skirts, but also to tops that show cleavage (see Image 8<sup>51</sup>). Several girls experienced a

**Jess:** *"When I walk through the hall in such a shirt, people can sometimes shout: 'Wow, big tits!'. But I just ignore that and move on."; "I make sure I show less cleavage and wear less tight clothing. So I try to take it into account. (...) But I think shirts with a little cleavage are just cute."*

Image 8

<sup>49</sup> Joshua: *"De open dag van binnenvaart was online via Teams. Maar een meisje stelde een vraag, en toen zei de leraar: 'Nee maar deze wereld is echt een mannelijke wereld'. Dus daar werd dat meisje niet zo enthousiast meer van. De leraren zouden zich minder moeten richten tot de mannen."*

Aletta: *"Ik hoor heel vaak discriminerende opmerkingen van leraren. Dingen als 'Je bent te dom voor deze opleiding' en 'Waarom zit je hier op school?'"*

<sup>50</sup> Aletta: *"Dan word je geseksualiseerd" and "Ik ben bang dat er dan in mijn kont geknepen wordt."*

<sup>51</sup> Jess: *"Als ik door de aula loop in zo'n shirtje dan kan er wel eens geroepen worden van: 'zo dikke tieten!'. Maar dat negeer je dan gewoon en loop je verder."; "Ik zorg wel dat ik minder decolleté laat zien en iets minder"*

teacher commenting on their choice of clothing (for example, see Image 9<sup>52</sup>). Instead of placing the responsibility on the students who yell at the girls, the quotations show some STC employees place the responsibility on the girls themselves. If victims are told it is their fault and responsibility when they are yelled at, they will also think it is their own fault if they get raped or assaulted. Victims of violence already naturally

**Emma:** *“During the first welding lesson it was 30 degrees outside. (...) At our school, we, women, are not allowed to wear shorts in the summer, as that would be provoking. (...) In fact, all my male classmates only wear their underpants under their overalls when it's above 25 degrees. As soon as we have a break, everyone undoes the upper part and ties it around their waists. So I wore a tank top under my overalls with spaghetti straps, and I also tied my overalls halfway through. After the break, my teacher called me over and put me in a separate cubicle. He said: ‘You have those nice big round breasts, maybe you should pay attention to that. I look at it from a student point of view, maybe this isn't so wise.’ And as a 15/16 year old girl who had just learned to weld for the first time, I was really like: ‘uhm thank you sir?’”*

Image 9

blame themselves for the crime taking place (Miller & Porter, 1983), and if the reaction of bystanders confirms this, this feeling is only reinforced and they themselves, and other future victims, will not tell anyone about the crime of which they have become victims.

### 3.2.2. In terms of emotions

During the interviews, I also asked the students whether they feel comfortable enough to discuss sensitive subjects in class, since room for an open dialogue was one of the indicators for an environment to be a safe space as defined by Poynter and Tubbs (2008). Some students asked me to specify the concept of “sensitive subjects”. However, I deliberately did not provide my definition, since I was interested in the topics *students* perceive as “sensitive”, as it might tell

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*strakke kleding aan. Zo probeer ik er rekening mee te houden. Ik doe het vooral omdat ik denk straks krijg ik weer een opmerking van een docent. Maar ik vind zelf shirtjes met een beetje decolleté gewoon mooi.”*

<sup>52</sup> Emma: *“Bij de eerste les Lassen- en bankwerken was het 30 graden buiten. En iedereen had z'n overall en werklaarzen aan, en ik had een hemdje en een broek onder mijn overall aan. Want, bij ons op school mogen wij, vrouwen, geen korte broeken aan in de zomer, want dat zou uitlokkend zijn. Je moet letten op wat je draagt, dat is wat je te horen krijgt. Het staat niet in de schoolregels, maar je doet het niet omdat een docent dan naar je toe komt om te zeggen dat het niet zo verstandig is om iets korts aan te hebben. Eigenlijk gaan al mijn mannelijke klasgenoten als het boven de 25 graden is in hun onderbroek hun overall in. Zodra je pauze hebt doe je het bovenste gedeelte los en knoop je dat om je middel heen. Dus ik had een hemdje onder mijn overall aan met van die spaghetti bandjes en ik had ook mijn overall halverwege omgeknoopt. Na de pauze roep mijn docent mij bij zich en zet me in een apart hokje. Hij zei: ‘Joh, je hebt van die mooie grote ronde borsten, misschien moet je daar even opletten. Ik kijk ernaar als een student, misschien is dit niet zo handig.’ En als 15/16-jarig meisje dat net voor de eerste keer heeft leren lassen, zit je daar echt van: ‘uhm dank u wel meneer?’”*

us something about the culture regarding the extent to which students discuss personal issues in general at school.

**Tommy:** *"I think you should never really bring up anyone's family anyway. Because, you never know if someone's family member died or something. (...) Just the private matters, I think you shouldn't discuss them at school. I don't think school is made for that."*

Image 10

Interestingly, as a response to my question, many students indicated they prefer to keep their personal and professional lives separate. Diana stated: *"That is, I don't have to throw my entire personal life into the classroom"*<sup>53</sup>, and Tommy explained he feels like topics such as domestic situations are delicate matters for most of the boys; see Image 10<sup>54</sup>. All of the examples of students indicating they do not want to share their personal stories or frustrations at school seem to portend a traditionally professional and formal<sup>55</sup> atmosphere in which emotions are not regularly shown and perhaps even silently forbidden.

Several students stated that handling emotions is one's own responsibility. This could partly be due to their personal preferences regarding dealing with emotions, but it could also indicate emotionally unsafe circumstances (Schwartz et al., 2013). The responsibility shift in any case means students expect peers to ask for help or a conversation if they need it, instead offering them help or a friendly ear on their own. This is also an idea maintained by the school. For example, Jess indicated that when she was depressed and at home, her school really helped her. Nevertheless, when she started going to school again, the school did not reach out to her at all anymore and did not provide after-care.

Furthermore, it seems that both staff and students deem it unnecessary to discuss certain (sensitive) topics. For example, many students did not see the point in discussing sexuality at

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<sup>53</sup> Diana: *"Nou ja, ik hou het liefst school en persoonlijk gescheiden. Dat wil zeggen dat ik niet mijn hele persoonlijke leven in de klas hoeft te gooien."*

<sup>54</sup> Tommy: *"Als het over thuis of zo gaat. Ik denk dat je sowieso nooit echt over iemands familie moet beginnen of zo. Want je weet nooit echt of iemands familielid of iemand is komen te overlijden of iets. Ik denk dat dat wel de gevoelige onderwerpen zijn. Zeg maar vooral de privé zaken. Ik denk dat je die liever niet moet bespreken op school. Daar is school niet voor gemaakt vind ik. Als ik bijvoorbeeld kut zit thuis, dan is school niet voor mij gemaakt om daarover te praten, een leraar gaat mij daar niet mee helpen."*

<sup>55</sup> In this case, I use the concept of "formal atmosphere" referring to an 'official' and 'structured' culture, in which hierarchy plays an important role, and informal relationships are not desired to be taken to the professional environment(s). In this, the impact of the sectors in which vocational institutes educate should not be forgotten either, although the scope of this thesis does not allow for a thorough analysis of the effects of the sectors, as was stated before.

school. Diana, a bisexual man, said he did not see why it would be needed to discuss people's sexuality in class (see Image 11<sup>56</sup>). Anne, identifying as a gay woman herself, said sexuality does not matter that much to the new generation anymore to discuss it in class. However, I also asked her if it would hypothetically be fine if

**Diana:** *"You know, very nice if someone is gay. Congrats, I guess. But it really doesn't interest me at all. People are not interested in that in general. I think the best way to deal with that is to not make a big deal out of it; don't make it special. They want it to become normal. Then let it be normal, don't make it a big thing."*

Image 11

someone *would* want to discuss topics such as their sexuality in class. She declared that would probably not be possible, assumably due to the general closed culture in which the students operate. The exploration and expression of sexuality are perfect examples of identity exploration, which often leads to resistance and apprehension. Therefore, I argue that STC as a school should promote a sense of safety with the aim to encourage and normalize identity exploration and visibility (Heffernan et al., 2017).

When I asked Dean if he leaves parts of his identity at home, he said that he takes everything with him, but he tries to minimise certain identity parts when at school. He continued telling me he had a depression (which he thus perceives as part of his identity), which is not something he feels like everybody should know. He said if someone would ask him about it he would not mind telling, but: *"I will not flaunt it, you should not make it a pity party."*<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, when I asked Dean what he would want to change at school, he instantly named his need for more openness.

This discrepancy was not only found in the interview with Dean. Many students declared they would want their school and classmates to become more open to the discussion of sensitive or personal issues, but at the same time, they prefer to keep their personal and educational lives separated. This contradiction is at least notable, and could be linked to the concept of toxic masculinity, by which I mean the norms and behaviour traditionally perceived as masculine that *should* be performed by men (Kupers, 2005). Toxic masculinity (linked to hegemonic masculinity, see section 3.2.3) requires and encourages men to suppress their emotions even

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<sup>56</sup> Diana: *"Weet je heel leuk dat iemand homo is. Gefeliciteerd denk ik, maar het interesseert me eigenlijk helemaal niks. Dat interesseert men niet. Ik vind dat de beste manier om daarmee om te gaan is om het niet heel groot te maken, het niet heel speciaal te maken. Men wil dat het normaal wordt. Laat het dan normaal zijn, maak er geen groot ding van."*

<sup>57</sup> Dean: *"Dat is niet iets wat in mijn ogen iedereen van mij hoeft te weten. Natuurlijk, als ze ernaar vragen vertel ik erover, maar het is niet dat ik daar te koop mee ga lopen, want ik vind namelijk niet dat je met dat soort dingen zielig moet gaan te doen."*

though they would want to express them. Moreover, since characteristics such as aggression, competitiveness, suppression of emotion, and physical strength are encouraged and praised (Elliot, 2018), toxic masculinity is dangerous to people of all genders and to societies in a broader sense. Because showing emotion is seen as a sign of weakness, and vulnerability amongst men is perceived as something bad (Connell, & Messerschmidt, 2005), men at STC assumably on the one hand want to ventilate their emotions, but on the other hand are expected and forced to not do this. Therefore, it is especially the suppression of emotion that seems to be a norm of importance for stakeholders of STC Group.

**Dean:** *“When I look at the shipping industries, you just have to be able to really indicate your limits: ‘this is going too far’. This is, of course, because the seafaring industry consists of men for 90 percent, if not more. That’s just a world in which you have to keep going and you have to be one of the guys. You have to be able to stand your ground to operate in that world. In that, you often notice that girls who are a bit more insecure, they often find that more difficult.”*

Image 12

Many students stated it is important to “man up”<sup>58</sup> if one wants to be a student at STC. As can be seen in Image 12<sup>59</sup>, Dean indicated it is important for a maritime student to set boundaries for when someone else is out of line. This trend negatively affects identity negotiation as it, assumably, leads to students of all genders feeling a pressure to constantly stand their grounds and not show any emotions. Furthermore, since some students stated mostly the male

students make jokes out of uncomfortable topics, not much space is available for people who do want to discuss those subjects. It has become a part of the culture to laugh away uncomfortable situations, in order to show toughness, which indicated the emotional suppression resulting from and praised by toxic masculinity.

Thus, on the one hand, the interviewed students want to be ‘normal’<sup>60</sup>; live up to the normative image of a student and not show emotions. On the other hand, when ‘forcing’ them to talk about

<sup>58</sup> All the students used the Dutch expression “Je mannetje staan”, meaning that one is capable to stand one’s ground; to speak up for and defend oneself.

<sup>59</sup> Dean: *“Als ik kijk naar de zeevaart dan moet je gewoon echt je grenzen aan kunnen geven: ‘dit gaat gewoon te ver’. Dat komt natuurlijk omdat de zeevaart voor 90 procent man is, als het niet meer is. Het is gewoon een, dat is gewoon een wereldje daar moet je je gewoon in staande houden en daar moet je wel één van de mannetjes zijn eigenlijk. Je moet je mannetje kunnen staan om in dat wereldje te kunnen opereren. Daarin merk je dat wel vaak dat meiden die wat onzekerder zijn, dat die daar dus wel vaak wat meer moeite mee hebben.”*

<sup>60</sup> ‘Normative behaviour’ and the idea of ‘normality’ are very present in and central to the ‘traditional Dutch’ culture (Kaldenbach, 2011). For example, a Dutch saying tells us: “Doe maar gewoon, dan doe je al gek genoeg”, which means something like: “Just act normal, as that is already crazy enough.” Since the Dutch culture tells us it is not normal to show emotions, this reinforces the concept of toxic masculinity.

more sensitive topics by interviewing them, they immediately showed a need for more (emotional) openness. As Kathleen Elliott (2018) argued, schools (should) play an important role in dismantling the inequalities and problematic behaviours resulting from the interactions between toxic masculinity and gendered patterns of power. If they do not take this role seriously, schools endorse an unsafe culture that praises cisgender heterosexual (predominantly white) men with hegemonic masculinity<sup>61</sup> despite their possible problematic behaviour, which discourages students to show any forms of human traits.

### 3.2.3. In terms of behaviour

#### Polished behaviour

As stated before, Anne indicated she finds herself being less of herself at school. As stated in chapter 1, a safe space would allow students to be “emotionally expressive” (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 7). However, unfortunately, Anne displays a “*more polished*”<sup>62</sup> and “*less flamboyant*” version of herself at school, by being “*less of herself*”, and feels like there is not much room for self-expression, indirectly indicating STC is not particularly an emotionally safe space (Quiros et al., 2012). This was confirmed by multiple students. Max explained he is less outspoken when at school, and tries to leave out his own opinions and ideas when participating in in-class discussions, since he wants everyone to stay “*satisfied*”<sup>63</sup>. Dean told me STC students need to prove they “*matter*”<sup>64</sup> by “*just acting normally*” and “*not doing crazy stuff.*”<sup>65</sup> Dean added a person’s actions determine the way one is treated and laughed at/with. For the students, it seems evident that one’s behaviour defines the way one is treated by teachers and students, and some of the students seem to ignore/forget/be unaware of other factors that may impact the teachers’ way of treating.

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<sup>61</sup> I will further elaborate on masculinities in the section 3.2.3.

<sup>62</sup> Anne seemed to use “*polished*” in a layered manner. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) “*polished*” can point to something or someone “free of imperfections”, but also something or someone “somewhat old-fashioned: characterized by elegance and refinement”. Both the definitions demonstrate the subjectivity of the term, as, for example, one can question the general existence of things “free of imperfections” and the link between “old-fashionedness” and “elegance and refinement”. Therefore, I would like to interpret the term in this thesis as referring to something or someone being “watered down”/“subdued”/“moderated”, or as Anne said: “less of oneself”.

<sup>63</sup> Max: “*Tevreden.*” This assumably means he wants his fellow students to be happy as well.

<sup>64</sup> I.e., “are worthy”.

<sup>65</sup> Dean: “*Dat is gewoon een kwestie van ja, effe in het begin laten zien, weet je, dat je, dat je er ook gewoon toe doet, en dan word je 9 van de 10 keer wel gewoon geaccepteerd in de groep, als je gewoon normaal doet, geen gekke dingen doet.*”

### Behaviour related to cultural background

When it comes to behaviour potentially related to cultural background(s), some teachers seem to have preferences. As Daan described, some teachers find it hard to deal with cultural differences. Joshua confirmed this notion (Image 13<sup>66</sup>) and Laura stated these teachers should be more

**Joshua:** *“The attention for us [students of colour] is less than for white students. If you don’t understand something, it’s really hard. In some things you notice that the other side [the white students] gets more attention.”*

Image 13

conscious of their choice of language. Therefore, Daan suggested to organise workshops for teachers who struggle with cultural differences, with the aim to let other Caribbean students feel more at home at school. The lack of understanding from some teachers, especially towards non-white and non-Dutch students, seems to confirm students’ feelings regarding teachers not being able to handle cultural differences.

This also reflects on how some teachers perceive the tone of voice of some non-Dutch students, as can be seen in the example given by Tommy, a white Dutch student, in Image 14<sup>67</sup>. He emphasized Caribbean students do have respect for the teachers, but have a different way of approaching situations when they do not agree with something, which was also

**Tommy:** *“If a Dutch person engages in a discussion with a teacher, that goes normally. But an Antillean, for example, if they do not agree with something or does not understand something, may raise their voice a little too quickly. And that teacher immediately feels attacked, they think: ‘Hey, why are you talking like that?’ But that’s just their way of... That’s their culture. (...) While a Dutch person says: ‘Well, madam or sir, can we sort this?’ And an Antillean says (Tommy puts on a ‘Caribbean accent’) ‘Fuck that swa’.”*

Image 14

confirmed by Max. The conflicts arising from Dutch white teachers being unable to properly interact with students of colour, shows how identity visibility intersecting with colourism and

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<sup>66</sup> Joshua: *“De aandacht voor ons [zwarte mensen] is minder dan voor witte studenten. Als je iets niet begrijpt, is dat wel echt moeilijk. In sommige dingen merk je dat de andere kant [witte mensen] meer aandacht krijgt.”*

<sup>67</sup> Tommy: *“Als een Nederlander een discussie aangaat met leraar, dan gaat dat gewoon normaal. Maar een Antilliaan, die, als die bijvoorbeeld het ergens niet mee eens is of iets niet snapt, dan verheft die zijn stem misschien iets te snel. En die leraar voelt zich dan gelijk aangevallen, die denkt van: ‘hé, waarom praat je zo?’ Maar dat is gewoon hun manier van... Dat is hun cultuur. (...) Terwijl een Nederlander zegt: ‘goh mevrouw of meneer, kunnen we het even uitpraten?’ En een Antiliaan zegt (Tommy zet een Caribisch accent op) ‘Fuck dat swa’.”*

(neo-colonial) racism can lead to oppressive and segregating situations for marginalised groups (Alcoff, 2005).

The lack of mutual understanding sometimes arises when the white Dutch teachers have

**Tommy:** *“A teacher had opened all the windows in the winter, and that man was just in his polo. Students have to take off their coats in class, but the Antilleans were all very cold, so they sat with their coats on because the windows were open. Then discussions arose about it in class, because the teacher would not understand that the students were not wearing their coats with the aim to be annoying, but simply because they were cold.”*

different ways of approaching discussions compared to non-Dutch and/or non-white students. However, sometimes, the cultural differences themselves cause the discussion in the first place, as can be read in Image 15<sup>68</sup>. The cultural differences at STC also lead to

Image 15

expectations and standards that can not be met by foreign students. Daan explained students coming from the Caribbean region have to figure out all the Dutch regulations and policies themselves, which is a big step for them when they were used to everything being sorted in their own country. Because he sometimes needs to invest time in figuring out how everything works, he, and other Caribbean students, cannot always deliver the expected schoolwork. Consequently, some teachers assume Caribbean students are lazy<sup>69</sup>, which makes the teachers start behaving in a different manner towards the Caribbean students. This subsequently leads to the students feeling discriminated, which might lead to a bigger and even more political conflict. Hence, not only are students expected to act in their culturally normative ways, the school in general also sets unrealistic expectations for non-Dutch students, which structurally make them less able to successfully complete their studies.

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<sup>68</sup> Tommy: *“Een leraar had alle ramen opengezet in de winter, en die man stond gewoon in z'n polo. En studenten moeten hun jas uit in de klas. Maar de Antillianen hadden het allemaal heel koud, dus die zaten met hun jas aan omdat de ramen open stonden. Dan kreeg je daar dus discussies over in de klas, omdat de leraar dan niet begreep dat de studenten niet hun jas aan hadden om irritant te doen, maar gewoon omdat ze het koud hadden.”*

<sup>69</sup> This is particularly problematic and related to neo-colonial racism, due to the stereotype of Caribbean people being lazy (Hernandez-Ramdwar, 2005; Deaux et al., 2007).

## Gender and behaviour

When it comes to behaviour, the interviews also demonstrated the teachers and the school favouring traditionally masculine behaviour for students. As Derrida (1973) pointed out, all concepts are relational, meaning that “masculinity” as a traditional concept was constructed in contrast with “femininity”. Therefore, it is impossible to provide ‘the’ definition of traditionally masculine behaviour. In this thesis, I refer to this behaviour talking about (characteristic) traits such as independence, decisiveness, dominance, risk taking, rapacious heterosexuality and emotional and physical strength (Runge, Frey, Gollwitzer, Helmreich & Spence, 1981; De Visser, Smith & McDonnell, 2009). These traits, linked to traditional/hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), appear to be favoured by teachers and students at STC Group.

**Joshua:** *“There is one girl in my class. This world is a bit manly. But in my house there were more women than men, and because of my upbringing I really do feel that women are smarter than men. But here, they always say that the world of the sea is more manly than womanly. Girls can do this job anyway, better even I think. Maybe not in terms of hands-on work. I think girls are sensitive. You have to be tough in that world. The girls I know there [at STC] are tough. As long as you are tough, you will be fine in that world.”*

Image 16

Joshua, a male student, indicated girls are sensitive, and implied they are therefore more often less capable to act in the “tough world” of seafaring (see Image 16<sup>70</sup>). Moreover, when I asked Jess what kind of jokes she comes across at school, she confirmed both fellow students and teachers sometimes joke about her not being capable to do tough work (Image 17<sup>71</sup>). Furthermore, *Image 17*

**Jess:** *“Misogynistic jokes. For example when I have to lift something very heavy and I supposedly couldn’t do that. So then they all gather around me and say: ‘Oh, do I need to help you?’. But they don’t have to, because I’m quite strong, they know that.”*

Max said that when teachers make jokes or comments, they mostly address the boys in class, which again demonstrates the preference regarding gender is hidden in subtle gestures. Lastly,

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<sup>70</sup> Joshua: *“Er zit 1 meisje in mijn klas. Deze wereld is een beetje mannelijk. Maar in mijn huis waren we met meer vrouwen dan mannen, en ik heb door mijn opvoeding wel echt het idee dat vrouwen slimmer zijn dan mannen. Maar ze zeggen hier altijd dat de wereld van de zee meer mannelijk dan vrouwelijk is. Meisjes kunnen dit werk sowieso doen, beter zelfs nog denk ik. Misschien niet qua praktijk. Meisjes vind ik wel gevoelig. In die wereld moet je wel tough zijn. Je ziet ook dat de meisjes die ik ken daar wel tough zijn. Zo lang je dat bent, komt het goed met je in die wereld.”*

<sup>71</sup> Jess: *“Vrouwonvriendelijke grapjes. Bijvoorbeeld dat ik iets heel zwaars moet tillen en dat zou ik dan zogenaamd niet kunnen. Dus dan komen ze weer met z’n allen er omheen staan: ‘Oh moet ik je even helpen?’. Maar dat hoeft niet, want ik ben best wel sterk, dat weten ze.”*

**Aletta:** *“Being myself as a woman, that’s not possible”, “I just want to be seen as a girl, and that that is then just okay” and “I wish I could be a bit more of a girl.”*

Image 18

Diana explained the seafaring industry in general is very misogynistic. He added that not only the work itself is female-unfriendly, but also the people on board. According to him, women are not considered as equals. Not surprisingly, this all affects female students at STC Group. Aletta poignantly described how the imposed and desired masculinity<sup>72</sup> makes her

feel; see Image 18<sup>73</sup>. Clearly, Aletta’s womanhood is suppressed by hegemonic masculinity (at STC), as occurs in society as well (Connell, 1987).

### **3.3. Internalized discrimination**

The ease with which some students spoke about experiences with discrimination as well as the ease with which some students made discriminatory remarks indicated the exclusion and discrimination at STC are internalised and normalised. In this thesis, I define internalised discrimination on a personal level as “the internalisation of societal values, and (...) often understood to be invisible to the persons themselves” (Maliepaard & Baumgartner, 2021, p. 115). In the following sections, examples of indicators for internalised discrimination will be outlined with regards to the act of policing each other (section 3.3.1), systemic discrimination (section 3.3.2) and the concept of acceptance (section 3.3.3).

#### 3.3.1 Policing each other

As some quotes demonstrate above, some interviewed students tended to share their opinion on the behaviour of others. Whereas some students just mentioned their opinion on other people’s behaviour, others felt a duty to tell others they disliked their behaviour, or even perceived it the duty of teachers or the school to point out and penalise the behaviour of other students, meaning they do not blame the bigger system or institute for incidents, but the individuals acting within the system.

This notion can indirectly be linked to the concept of victim blaming. Victim blaming can be defined as the act of holding a victim accountable and responsible for their victimisation (Eigenberg & Garland, 2008). Particularly interesting is the fact that some students I spoke to also engage in the act of victim blaming. A very explicit example came from Dean, who, when

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<sup>72</sup> Although Aletta did not use this term herself, her words indicated she was suffering from the desired masculinity at STC.

<sup>73</sup> Aletta: *“Mezelf zijn als vrouw, dat gaat niet”, “Ik wil gewoon gezien worden als een meisje, en dat dat dan oké is” and “Ik zou graag wat meer een meisje willen kunnen zijn.”*

talking about people who are discriminated, firmly stated: *“Yes, all well you are saying that you are being discriminated against, but what do you do to ensure that you are not discriminated against?”*<sup>74</sup> He, in this case, places the blame on the victims of discrimination, instead of the perpetrators, and thinks it is the responsibility of the victims to make sure they are not discriminated against.

Furthermore, victim blaming is highly gendered, as people who are not cisgender men are more likely to become a victim of any kind of harm during their lives (Hayes, Lorenz & Bell, 2013). Therefore, victim blaming is also very much related to slut shaming, which is the act of sully and shaming of people, mostly female, for alleged sexual activity and expressing (parts of) their sexuality (Hackman, Pember, Wilkerson, Burton & Usdan, 2017). Although slut shaming is mostly performed in favour of men, because their sexual behaviour is encouraged and rewarded whereas women’s sexual behaviour is not (Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong & Seeley, 2014), women engage in slut shaming as well (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). This became clear when talking to Mia.

**Mia:** *“I think you shouldn’t expose yourself anyway. In any case, I think that sometimes women go a bit too far in that regard. (...) It’s also a kind of self-respect.”*

*“I’ve always really liked skirts. But, the nightlife should not be taken to school. You don’t go to school in your shortest skirt. You are in a men’s school anyways. (...) For example, when I go to school, I am concerned with everything being well covered. Of course you have quite a lot of Moroccan and Turkish boys [at school]. They prefer women to be as covered up as well as possible, and I try to take that into account.”*

*“You can expect certain reactions (...) because you actually provoke that yourself. They show up with a short skirt and then say that they get weird comments, and then I think yes, but, you kind of did it yourself?”*

*“But I also think it’s kind of a moment for a teacher to say to girls who dress very provocatively: ‘Hey do you think this is sensible?’”*

Image 19

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<sup>74</sup> Dean: *“Ja, het is wel leuk dat jij loopt te roepen dat je wordt gediscrimineerd, maar wat doe jij om ervoor te zorgen dat je niet gediscrimineerd wordt?”*

When Mia and I talked about unsafety and women-unfriendly situations, she made some strong statements on whose responsibility this is (see Image 19<sup>75</sup> above). It is no surprise *men* ventilate their opinion on women's appearances, but it is remarkable that some women also engage in the acts of victim blaming and slut shaming. As Ringrose and Renold (2012) stated, this can be perceived as a kind of internalised oppressions. Interestingly, Mia seemed to criticise and police others *and* herself, also because she takes the cultural diversity at her school into consideration. However, although she had one conversation with a boy with a Moroccan cultural background in her class about how he prefers women to dress and behave, she also stated that not many conversations are held on cultural diversity because other students in her class are not open to those conversations.

When it came to people with non-Dutch cultural backgrounds, students also seemed to have their opinions. To exemplify, Tommy said: *"Yes, those foreign youngsters, they do have a big mouth. Just especially those Moroccans and Turks have big mouths."*<sup>76</sup> He added that those people are often the younger ones who are still in high school, aiming to nuance his statement. When it comes to policing and criticising other students, some interviewed students also have an opinion on individuals saying that their cultural background affects the way they are treated at school (see Image 20<sup>77</sup> on the next page) .

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<sup>75</sup> Mia: *"Ik vind, sowieso moet je jezelf niet blootstellen. Ik vind sowieso dat soms vrouwen ook daarin misschien iets te ver gaan. Je gaat ook niet in zo'n korte outfit naar een feestje zeg maar. Maar ik doe het ook gewoon meer omdat je weet dat je met meerdere culturen te maken hebt. Het is ook een soort van respect naar jezelf toe."*  
*"Ik ben altijd heel erg geweest van ik hou best wel van een rokje. Alleen het uitgaansleven moet je niet meenemen naar school. Je gaat niet in je kortste rokje naar school toe. Sowieso zit je in een mannenschool. Dus 90% is al man. Ik vind ik het niet terecht dat je je uitdagend gaat kleden ofzo. En ik merk ook bijvoorbeeld wel dat ik bezig ben als ik naar school ga met: is alles wel goed bedekt? Je hebt natuurlijk best wel veel Marokkaanse en Turkse jongens. Die hebben zoiets van een vrouw moet eigenlijk het liefst zo goed mogelijk bedekt zijn, en ik probeer daar wel een beetje rekening mee houden."*

*"Ik denk ook dat het voor sommige meiden moet kunnen hoor. Ik bedoel, als je zo in elkaar zit en je kan ermee omgaan, prima, doe het. Alleen je kan bepaalde reacties verwachten en dan moet je niet achteraf gaan zeggen van 'oh ik word voor dit uitgemaakt' of 'mijn nummer wordt gevraagd' of 'er wordt naar me gefloten'. Want dat lok je eigenlijk zelf op zo'n moment uit. Het is natuurlijk dat ze dan met een kort rokje komen en vervolgens zeggen dat ze rare opmerkingen krijgen, en dan denk ik ja, maar, je doet het toch een soort van zelf?"*

*"Maar ik vind ook dat het een soort van moment is voor een leraar om tegen meisjes die zich heel erg uitdagend aankleden te zeggen van: 'hé vind je dit verstandig?'"*

<sup>76</sup> Tommy: *"Ja, die buitenlandse jongeren, die hebben wel een grote mond. Gewoon vooral die Marokkanen en Turken hebben een grote mond."*

<sup>77</sup> Diana: *"Wel vind ik dat dat heel vaak als excuus gebruikt wordt. Op het moment dat iemand bijvoorbeeld hele slechte cijfers heeft en diegene heeft dan bijvoorbeeld een andere huidskleur ofzo, dan gebruiken zij dat als reden dat dat is opgegeven. Maar ik vind dat dat niet zo is. Ik bedoel, iedereen haalt onvoldoendes af en toe."*

Dean: *"Wat ik wel heb gezien, en dat is niet alleen op het STC, maar gewoon algemeen in de samenleving, is dat mensen die het hardst roepen dat ze gediscrimineerd worden, dat zijn vaak de mensen die het meest discrimineren."*

Mia: *"Je gaat echt niet een lager cijfer halen omdat je een andere cultuur hebt of wat dan ook. Je wordt behandeld hoe je zelf iemand behandelt."*

**Diana:** *“I do think that it is very often used as an excuse. For example, the moment someone has very bad grades and that person has, for example, a different skin colour or something, they use that as the reason [for being given a bad grade]. But I don’t think that’s the case. I mean, everyone gets low grades every now and then.”*

**Dean:** *“What I’ve seen, and that’s not just at STC, but just in general in society, is that people who say the loudest they are being discriminated are often the people who discriminate the most.”*

**Mia:** *“You’re really not going to get a lower grade because you’re from a different culture or whatever. You are treated the way you treat others yourself.”*

Image 20

It, in any case, is clear that some interviewed students felt comfortable enough to share their opinions on the behaviour and feelings of others. Sometimes, it regarded people who shared similar identity aspects with them (for example, Mia, identifying as female herself, criticizing women), and sometimes they criticized people for their behaviour related to identity aspects they did not have in common (for example, Dean, being a white person, criticizing non-white people). The apparent internalisation of problems within the students reflecting on their policing behaviour, could potentially affect the behaviour of others when they feel the judgement of other students.

### 3.3.2 Systemic discrimination

It would be beneficial to the safety at school if the aforementioned policing behaviour would be exceptional examples, but these problems seem internalised as such that students behave in a system in which sexism, racism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination are ‘normal’; it mostly concerns internalised systemic forms of discrimination. In this thesis, systemic discrimination is defined as: “pattern or practice, policy and/or class cases where the alleged discrimination has a broad impact on an industry, profession, company, or geographic location.” (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2006, para. 4).

To exemplify, in the corridors of STC locations I often heard boys shouting “*dirty homo*” or “*homo*” to each other and a teacher used the word “*homo*” as a mnemonic device to replace the word “*main engine*” (the Dutch word is “*hoofdmotor*”, which would make “*homo*” a sort of abbreviation). Moreover, during conversations with executives and staff, quite a few controversial statements regarding homosexuality were made. For example, a member of the educational support staff told me she has nothing against “*gays*” and “*lesbians*”, but that there

are also “*drama-faggots*” and “*dykes*”<sup>78</sup>, who are “*laying it on thick*”<sup>79</sup> and she does not like that. Furthermore, an executive told me he is “*totally okay*” with people being gay and a student should feel accepted. “*But,*” he wondered if students<sup>80</sup> should “*actively promote their homosexuality*”. He argued that heterosexual people do not act straight all the time either, and thus did not understand why “*gay men*” should “*constantly*” show they are gay. The supervisor indicated the moment someone is “*acting gay*”, he is at a crossroads and wonders who should adapt. Because, if the group is bothered by “*the homosexual behaviour*” of the individual student, he wondered if he should ask the group to stop being bothered, or the individual student to adjust his behaviour. The fact that employees make these kinds of derogatory statements in a conversation about inclusion and discrimination, demonstrates how normalised and internalised homophobia is at STC.

When it comes to skin colour or cultural backgrounds, jokes and comments are also made by students and employees. Most of the people state one has to be able to handle this and it is “*just*” part of the culture. For example, an employee said she simply calls a colleague “*fucking Turk*”<sup>81</sup>, but that the person whom it concerns does not mind her doing that. Furthermore, during an in-class conversation, it became apparent that a boy with a traditional Asian appearance was called “*springroll baker*”<sup>82</sup> by his classmates. In front of his classmates, he declared he did not mind this, but he also clearly stated that if people from outside his class would do that, he *would* mind. Also, when I spent a day at one of the locations of STC, a student was called “*kaolo Somma*” by another student, which means something along the lines of “*fucking Somali*”.

These discriminatory remarks seem to be normalised and accepted amongst many of the students and employees of STC Group. Regrettably, for example, many stakeholders of colour indicated there is no point in responding to the comments, because, as an employee stated, it is hard to prove racism and one will not be taken seriously, especially if one is a student. This, again, relates back to the lack of room for an open dialogue, which is particularly important for an educational safe space (Poynter & Tubbs, 2008). Furthermore, for many people, the expressions do not fall under racism, and several teachers said students are quick to call issues discrimination. It therefore seems like students prefer to accept the situation as it is now, as they feel like they can not fight against these systemic forms of oppression themselves.

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<sup>78</sup> Employee: “*Relnichten*” and “*Potten*”.

<sup>79</sup> Employee: “*Het er dik bovenop leggen*”.

<sup>80</sup> This executive was particularly talking about *men* who are homosexual.

<sup>81</sup> Employee: “*KutTurk*”.

<sup>82</sup> Multiple students: “*Loempiabakker*”.

Furthermore, employees continuously proclaimed it is very unsafe for women and girls on board of ships and that girls need to be prepared for ships with only men. A poignant yet perfect example of the emphasis on the responsibility for female students is an internship brochure of STC. Chapter 8 of this brochure is called “Lady on board”<sup>83</sup>, which is specifically intended for girls who are going on an internship in the maritime world.

The first problem is that this chapter is only written for girls, in order to teach them how to behave amongst men and boys, while no chapter was written to teach boys how to behave with girls and women on board. This chapter furthermore implies the entire

#### Kledingkeuze

Je wilt uiteraard jezelf blijven, ook in je kleding. Maar houd wel rekening met de omstandigheden. Kleet je niet uitdagend en draag geen diepe decolletés. Draag gemakkelijke kleding, zoals een lange of korte broek en een T-shirt. Een tip van vrouwelijke stagiaires is om bij het dragen van een overall de zijkant dicht te naaien. Je kunt ook de knoopjes dicht doen of een hemdje eronder aantrekken. Een fietsbroek (daar is 'ie!) eronder is ook prettig; het schuurt niet en je hebt geen inkiijk. Houd in gedachten dat je aan boord bent om te werken en te leren, niet om een modeshow te lopen.

Image 21

brochure is meant for boys, making them the normative students, and one chapter needs to be written for the girls, making them a minority right away. Moreover, the one chapter for female students instructs them to not wear provocative clothes or plunging necklines (because then the men on board are distracted?), tells us that women wash their own underwear on board (because the laundryperson cannot handle women’s underwear?), and assumes girls themselves cannot understand they are not on board to do a fashion show (see Image 21).

#### Bikini en ondergoed

Natuurlijk hoef je jezelf niet helemaal te bedekken als je mannelijke collega's in zwembroek of korte broek op het dek of bij het zwembad hangen. Badkleding dragen is ook voor vrouwen doodnormaal. Maar als het jouw beurt is om wat te drinken te halen in de mess, is het wel handig om even een (strand)jurkje of een pareo te dragen. De dames aan boord brengen hun ondergoed niet naar de wasbaas, maar wassen het zelf. De andere was kan wel mee met 'de grote hoop'. Je kunt ook overwegen om je kleding zelf uit de droger halen.

#### Grenzen en gedrag

Als je het vervelend vindt dat er 'grapjes' worden gemaakt, dan is het verstandig om direct aan te geven dat je daar niet van bent gediend. Maar wees ook weer niet té 'mutsig'. Niet alles is serieus gemeend. Probeer jezelf te blijven en geef duidelijk je grenzen aan.

Probeer je niet af te zonderen, maar blijf in contact met anderen. En flirt niet, ook niet een beetje. Aan boord wordt alles uitvergroot en als vrouw aan boord lig je helemaal onder een vergrootglas. Nogmaals: duidelijkheid en op een rustige manier je grenzen aangeven, helpt. En grap lekker terug als je je daar prettig bij voelt.

Image 22

Later in the chapter, the girls are asked to not to be too “ornery” (“mutsig”) when it comes to jokes from colleagues (see Image 22). The choice for the word “mutsig” is already problematic as it confirms the stereotype of women whining a lot *because* they are women (by using “muts” meaning “pussy”, meaning that “mutsig” would be translated to “pussy-ish”). In addition, due to these kind of texts, students will question their own feelings regarding other people’s transgressive behaviour during the internship and will certainly not report it to a colleague or supervisor, because they have been told not to be too “mutsig” with this kind of behaviour.

<sup>83</sup> “Dame aan boord.”

In case of transgressive behaviour, the brochure first advises: “Try to use humour to indicate your limits, if you are able to” (see Image 23). Why does someone need to use humour to indicate their boundaries? Moreover, the headline of the section is: “Is someone crossing your boundaries?” Nevertheless, a few lines later it tells you what to do if someone *really* crosses your boundaries: “Is someone really pushing your boundaries? Immediately make clear you do not

#### Gaat iemand over je grenzen heen?

Denk dan aan het volgende:

- Probeer humor te gebruiken om je grenzen aan te geven, als je dat lukt. Bijvoorbeeld als een collega in het openbaar steeds schuine grapjes naar je maakt. Je kunt ook de collega serieus aanspreken op het ongewenste gedrag.
- Gaat iemand écht over jouw grens? Geef dan meteen aan dat je daar niet van bent gediend. Probeer de ander te stoppen.

*Image 23*

want this and try to stop the other.” The question this raises is, when the brochure talked about people crossing boundaries before, was it not yet about *really* transgressive behaviour? When is behaviour *really* transgressive? Who determines that?

Furthermore, the brochure clearly states: “Don’t flirt, not even a little.” This, however, is nowhere stated in the other chapters aimed at men. This reminds me of the double standard for women and men, that causes women’s sexual behaviour to be frowned upon, and men’s sexual behaviour to be cheered (Allison & Risman, 2013). Moreover, because women are told to not flirt and not dress ‘provocatively’, the aforementioned act of victim blaming is also reflected on the internship brochure. Moreover, during conversations with staff, some people started talking about sexual assault cases against girls on ships, and immediately questioned the case(s). Employees wondered whether the assault took place at all, if women made it a big thing when it was something small, and if women asked for it themselves by wearing “*provocative*” clothes or engaging in “*flirty*” behaviour. If students would hear about sexual assault in this way, an unsafe environment is created within the school, especially for victims of intimidation and sexual violence.

In conclusion, Mia stating it is a teacher’s responsibility to speak up if a girl dresses “*too provocative*” is perhaps not as surprising as it seems in the first place, given the fact that many employees of STC Group feel the same way. Both orally and in writing, the school supports the idea that women and other marginalised groups have to adapt to the environment, not the other way around.

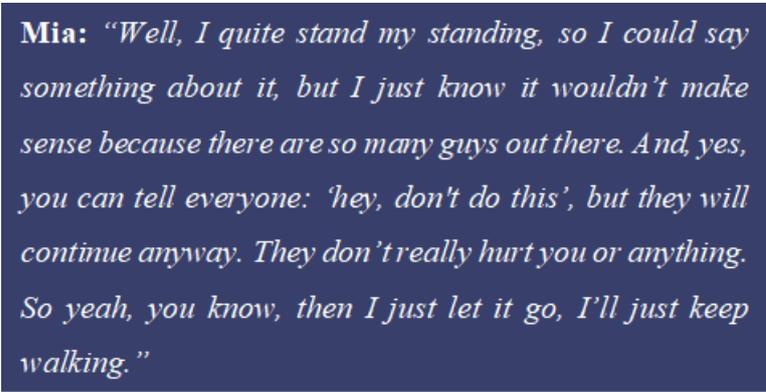
### 3.3.3 Acceptance

Lastly, the internalisation of the unsafety, discrimination and other forms of exclusion has also led to a certain form of acceptance amongst the students. For example, when talking with

Joshua, he indicated he is the only boy of colour in his class and the white students do not talk to him. Regarding this notion, he stated: *“I can’t do anything about it, this is just the way it is. We have to move on.”*<sup>84</sup> The same goes for Emma, who stated: *“The misogynistic jokes predominate. The worst part is, I find myself going along with it. Because that’s easier than raising the issue every time.”*<sup>85</sup> Thus, Emma goes along in the derogatory behaviour of others, perhaps as a means of self-protection to protect herself from unsafe or uncomfortable situations.

According to some students, resistance would not make a difference. For example, Emma stated: *“I don’t think it’s going to help much if you report it every time a comment is made. That will not make you more cool and then you will not be perceived as nice in class.”*<sup>86</sup> This also relates to previously discussed literature (section 1.1.3) on young people not filing complaints because of their fear to be perceived as immature by others (Breslin et al., 2007).

Mia, by contrast, seems to not worry that much about classmates not liking her, but she still does not see the point in continuously telling people to not make derogatory comments anymore (see Image 24<sup>87</sup>). In both Mia’s and Emma’s case, the



**Mia:** *“Well, I quite stand my standing, so I could say something about it, but I just know it wouldn’t make sense because there are so many guys out there. And, yes, you can tell everyone: ‘hey, don’t do this’, but they will continue anyway. They don’t really hurt you or anything. So yeah, you know, then I just let it go, I’ll just keep walking.”*

Image 24

‘reward’ for indicating one’s boundaries is not great enough, or not present at all. When it concerned the topic of racism, Daan explained: *“You can’t expect much from a student. Especially in my class you have a few of those villagers (“dorpelingetjes”) who come from Werkendam, they don’t know any better. I don’t expect anything from them. I’m not going to talk to them about discrimination anyway.”*<sup>88</sup> Although Daan indicated to be unbothered by the

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<sup>84</sup> Joshua: *“Ik kan er niks aan doen, het is gewoon zo, we moeten door.”*

<sup>85</sup> Emma: *“De vrouwonvriendelijke grappen voeren de boventoon. Het ergste is, ik merk aan mezelf dat ik erin meega. Want dat is makkelijker dan het elke keer maar aan te kaarten.”*

<sup>86</sup> Emma: *“Ik denk niet dat het heel veel opschiet als jij elke keer een melding gaat maken, mocht er een opmerking gemaakt worden. Daar word je niet leuker van en dan word je in de klas niet leuker gevonden.”*

<sup>87</sup> Mia: *“Nou, ik sta best wel sterk in m’n schoenen, dus ik zou er wel wat van kunnen zeggen, maar ik weet gewoon dat het geen zin heeft, want er zitten daar zo veel jongens. En, ja, je kan wel tegen iedereen zeggen van: ‘hé, doe dit niet’, maar ze gaan toch wel door. Ze doen je niet echt pijn of zo. Dus ja, weet je, dan denk ik laat maar gewoon gaan, ik loop gewoon door.”*

<sup>88</sup> Daan: *“Je kan niet veel verwachten van een student. Vooral in mijn klas heb je een paar van die dorpelingetjes, die uit Werkendam komen, zij weten niet beter. Ik verwacht niks van hen. Ik ga sowieso niet in gesprek met hun over discriminatie.”*

behaviour of others, he explicitly wanted to participate in this research, aiming to help develop a safer and less racist environment for future students of colour at STC.

Thus, the students seem to feel they do not have another choice than to just continue being a student and tolerate the forms of discrimination. The unsafety is internalised as such that the students do not see the point in intervening. Some even agree with some forms of discrimination, even though I believe they are not all aware of their contribution to the various forms of discrimination. In any case, the students negotiated their identities and adjusted their behaviour to the extent that students of colour tolerate racism and female students tolerate sexism. The idea that these students are already used to the unsafety and exclusion at school, worries me. Perhaps, they hide or show parts of their identity in order to fit in, perhaps to survive. In any case, I can conclude that the image of the ideal STC student reproduces western, masculine, patriarchal and normative morals. This impacts students, as they have internalised an image of an ideal student they can not live up to, and have accepted unsafety as part of their educational experiences, which both negatively relates to the way they negotiate their identities.

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## Conclusion

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This thesis' study aimed to answer the following research question: *“How do students in a Dutch vocational secondary educational institute experience (un)safety, in relation to showing/hiding (non)normative aspects of their identities?”* In order to do so, three sub questions were raised, and qualitative research, through ethnographic research and feminist interviews, was conducted.

The first sub question was: *“How do students understand and experience safety within the context of their educational institute?”* To answer this question, the concept of safety was unpacked. It became apparent that safety is often measured by indicating the absence/presence of physical unsafety (such as hurt, injury and hazardous conditions) in a situation. This left me wondering how safety can be measured within educational institutes when no direct or visible unsafety is present, and more importantly, how *students* experience safety. Naturally, the level of safety experienced differed per student. During the interviews, most students initially thought of *physical* safety. Only when I asked follow-up questions in which I did not necessarily include the word “safety”, they described unpleasant experiences linked to social-emotional safety. Both the literature (e.g., Shean & Mander, 2020) and answers of the interviewed students indicated that safety is of impact on the behaviour and results of students. To that extent, it is of concern that the forms of discrimination affecting the students' feelings of safety were actually more serious than some of them made it sound. In other words, students stating they feel safe, does not directly mean students are situated in emotionally safe environments. Thus, students understand safety within the context of their educational institutes in various ways, but mainly in relation to physical safety. Nevertheless, their experiences, behaviour and school results are inevitably impacted by social-emotional safety, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes consciously.

The second sub question was: *“How do students negotiate which aspects of their identities are made visible or invisible within STC Group?”* To answer this question, the concept of identity negotiation was first explored, and a distinction was made between visible/non-visible identities and hiding/showing (parts of) identities. When analysing the conducted in-depth interviews, it became apparent that the students, the teachers and even the school as an institute have an implicit image of the ideal STC student in mind, which reflects western patriarchal ideals. Sometimes, this image is expressed directly, but it mainly exists through subtle manifestations.

It certainly seemed like students (unconsciously) adjust their behaviour to the image of the ideal student, partly due to the internalisation of their feelings of deviation. For example, multiple factors indicated this ideal student should keep their personal and professional lives separate. As a result of the image and toxic and hegemonic masculinity, students seem to ensure they do not show any emotions at school. Thus, one could conclude students negotiate their identities with the (unconscious) image of the ideal STC student in mind.

The last sub question was: *“How do marginalised groups negotiate (the presentation of) their identities in educational environments?”* One of the distressing problems of the image of the ideal student, is that marginalised individuals have no chance of entirely fitting in with this image. Based on the findings of the interviews I would describe the ideal student as male, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender, and not flamboyant. This, of course, is a partly personal and non-exhaustive interpretation. Nonetheless, the interviews indeed demonstrated students with traditionally non-normative identity aspects are to a greater extent affected by the institutional unsafety and normativity. Furthermore, these interviewees are more likely to notice the forms of discrimination and exclusion at school, and can provide several examples of ways in which it has become apparent they do not look and/or behave like the normative student. Thus, in comparison to students who, at first glance, fit the image, marginalised students seem to be more aware of (the process of) their identity negotiation.

In conclusion, students in a Dutch vocational secondary educational institute tend to state they feel safe, mostly since they focus on physical safety, while their other remarks suggest that parts of their educational environments contribute to (perhaps subtle) feelings of unsafety. Furthermore, part of this unsafety is affected by an image of a perfect student (and vice versa), that almost no one can completely live up to. As a result, - especially marginalised - individuals adjust their behaviour and looks (unconsciously) aiming to fit in with this image. In some cases, this means that identity aspects are invigorated/accentuated, and in some cases it leads to identity aspects being hidden/watered-down. This behaviour could be described as identity negotiation, and is also done by ‘normative’ students, but seems to have a greater impact on marginalised students. Although the internalised rules and ideals may appear innocent, it should not be forgotten they are part of an educational institute’s culture. This means that the problematic consequences of the culture (such as negative impacts on identity negotiation and students’ wellbeing as a result of unsafety) also impact our society when young people, for example, unconsciously continue to internalise discrimination they have been taught to accept at school. Certainly, a relation was recognised between Dutch vocational secondary students’

experiences regarding (un)safety and identity negotiation, since the ways in which students experience safety affects the extent to which they ‘decide’ to show and/or hide (non)normative aspects of their identities, and vice versa.

### **Limitations**

COVID-19 has inevitably influenced the methods, context, involved parties, and outcomes of this thesis’ study mainly due to the limitation to online communication. Furthermore, in this study, “safety” was taken and analysed in relation to identity negotiation. However, other factors, apart from but still intersecting with safety, relate to the identity negotiation of students as well. For example, the sectors in which the students are educated, affect STC Group and its stakeholders inevitably, and vice versa. The maritime/technical/logistical context was, due to the scope of this thesis, not addressed to a great extent. Therefore, I should emphasise that the students’ experiences and feelings still need to be understood in the context in which they were shaped and reported on. I also wish to emphasise I did not aim at generalisable results and statements; I aimed to share the experiences of the students and learn from these experiences also for future reference and research.

### **Suggestions for future research**

Honestly, I could write an entire thesis on my suggestions for future research. I urge scholars to conduct further research on vocational students in general, and on marginalised groups within vocational education in particular. More specifically, I encourage scholars to listen to marginalised individuals who do not fit the normative image of a student, and, on an even more personal note, to those who do not fit within institutional systems because the systems were not designed for them. Furthermore, because of the tension between the individuals at STC who currently deny the presence of unsafety and discrimination and the people who are willing to work on the problems, more qualitative action research would most likely be valuable in order to demonstrate and generate pleasant outcomes of change. This would, ideally, support those in need.

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## **Appendix A: Key questions**

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### **In Dutch:**

1. Zou je iets over jezelf willen vertellen?
2. Waarom wilde je graag meedoen aan dit onderzoek?
3. Wat betekent diversiteit voor jou?
4. Hoe zie je de diversiteit op school?
5. Wat betekent inclusiviteit voor jou?
6. Heb je het gevoel dat de school inclusief is?
7. Voel je je veilig op school?
8. Voel je je veilig in je klas?
9. Zijn er momenten geweest waarop je je onveilig hebt gevoeld?
10. Heb je je wel eens gediscrimineerd gevoeld?
11. Heb je wel eens gezien of gehoord dat andere studenten op school met discriminatie te maken hadden?
12. Heb je het gevoel dat je gevoelige onderwerpen kan bespreken met je klasgenoten?
13. Heb je het gevoel dat je gevoelige onderwerpen kan bespreken met docenten?
14. Heb je het gevoel dat je jezelf kan zijn op school?
15. Zijn er delen van je identiteit die je thuislaat als je naar school gaat? Zo ja, welke? Of zijn er stukjes van jezelf die je juist accentueert of verbergt als je op school bent?
16. Wat zou jouw gevoel van inclusiviteit kunnen vergroten? Zijn er praktische dingen die beter kunnen op het gebied van veiligheid of inclusie?
17. Zijn er nog andere dingen die je graag zou willen vertellen?
18. Heb je nog vragen voor mij?

**In English:**

1. Could you tell me something about yourself?
2. Why did you want to participate in this research?
3. What does diversity mean to you?
4. How do you see the diversity at school?
5. What does inclusivity mean to you?
6. Do you feel the school is inclusive?
7. Do you feel safe at school?
8. Do you feel safe in your class?
9. Have there been times when you have felt unsafe?
10. Have you ever felt discriminated against?
11. Have you ever seen or heard that other students at school faced discrimination?
12. Do you feel like you can discuss sensitive topics with your classmates?
13. Do you feel like you can discuss sensitive topics with teachers?
14. Do you feel like you can be yourself at school?
15. Are there parts of your identity that you leave at home when you go to school? If yes, which one(s)? And are there parts of yourself that you accentuate or hide when you are at school?
16. What could help increase your sense of inclusivity at school? Are there practical things that could be done better with regards to safety or inclusion?
17. Are there any other things you would like to tell me?
18. Do you have any questions for me?

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## **Appendix B: E-mail sent out to students**

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### **In Dutch:**

Hallo student!

Hopelijk gaat alles goed met je in deze rare tijd. Ik zal me even voorstellen: mijn naam is Yara, ik ben zelf ook nog student 😊. Op dit moment loop ik stage bij STC en doe ik onderzoek naar diversiteit, discriminatie en veiligheid.

Het doel van mijn stage is om een advies te geven aan de school, waarin ik vertel waar studenten en medewerkers tegenaan lopen, en wat het STC kan doen op school om discriminatie te verminderen en de veiligheid te verbeteren.

Je raadt het misschien al, maar voor dit onderzoek heb ik jou nodig! Ik wil graag een uurtje met je in gesprek. Ik ben benieuwd of je je veilig voelt op school, of je vindt dat jouw klas divers is (dus dat er veel verschillende mensen inzitten), en of je wel eens met discriminatie of andere vervelende situaties te maken hebt gehad.

Als je wil helpen bij mijn onderzoek kan je een mailtje sturen naar [y.abbing@stc-r.nl](mailto:y.abbing@stc-r.nl). Ik zou graag een 'interview' via Teams of in het echt met je willen inplannen. In mijn onderzoek zal ik je naam uiteraard niet noemen.

Je hebt tot [**voeg datum in**] om je aan te melden. Als je je hebt aangemeld krijg je vanzelf een email terug van mij. Ik hoor het super graag van je als je me wil helpen. Ik hoop dat we de school samen nóg veiliger en diverser kunnen maken 😊.

Fijne dag vandaag en groetjes,

Yara

## **In English:**

Hello student!

I hope all is well with you in these strange times. Let me first introduce myself: my name is Yara, I am also a student myself 😊. At the moment I am doing my internship at STC and I am exploring diversity, discrimination and safety.

The purpose of my internship is to give advice to the school, in which I would explain which problems students and staff encounter, and what STC could do to reduce discrimination and improve safety at school.

You probably guessed it, but for this research I need you! I would like to talk to you for an hour. I am curious if you feel safe at school, if you think your class is diverse (i.e. there are many different people in it), and if you have ever had to deal with discrimination or other unpleasant situations.

If you want to help with my research, you can send an email to [y.abbing@stc-r.nl](mailto:y.abbing@stc-r.nl). I would like to schedule an 'interview' with you via Teams or in person. In my research I will of course not mention your name.

You have until **[insert date]** to register. If you have registered, you will automatically receive an email from me. I would love to hear if you would like to help me. I hope we can make the school even safer and more diverse together 😊.

Have a nice day and best regards,

Yara

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## **Appendix C: Introducing the interviewees**

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It is important to introduce the interviewees, who have voluntarily participated in this research. Of course, the participants in ‘the sample’ have an undeniable impact on the results. This, however, I consider a strength, as I am not looking for generalisable results. As said before, I aim to depict personal and unique experiences, that tell us something about the safety and culture of a particular Dutch secondary professional educational institute, and I do not aim to imply that these results automatically also apply to other educational institutes or all the other students at this particular school. Furthermore, I should acknowledge that I have actively been looking for quotes that resonated with the topics of this study, which means that you, as a reader, will only get to see a certain side of the interviewees and interviews.

To both my supervisor and me, it seemed relevant to account the voices of many different people within STC Group. Therefore, I searched for a big variety of people to talk to. It was however hard to find students and employees of colour within the organisation, and it was simultaneously hard to find older (mostly male) teachers who were willing to talk to me about the main topics of this research. The vast majority of the 90 students who took part in the in-class discussions was white. About 80% percent of these students was male, 20% female. I also had conversations with more than 45 (former) employees. About 55% of these employees was female and 45% male. About 85% of these workers was white. Apart from 45 employees whom I spoke with individually, I also had collective discussions with entire teams as a result of presentations I gave. Employees I spoke with during 1-on-1 conversations were for example: fellow colleagues from the Innovation & Education department, HRM employees, supervisors, teachers, mentors, directors, education managers, administrative employees and employees of STC International and STC Training & Consultancy<sup>89</sup>.

In the following section, I will proudly and gratefully introduce you to the students whom I conducted in-depth interviews with. Later after the interviews were conducted, I texted/e-mailed the interviewees to ask them which pseudonym they wanted me to use when referring to them. Joshua did not respond to my message(s)<sup>90</sup>, and Jess and Emma asked me to think of a nickname myself; all the others have come up with a name themselves. The interviews were

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<sup>89</sup> These are company-related terms and titles, but important to mention since they illustrate the variety of people I spoke to regarding positions within the company.

<sup>90</sup> Assumably because he was doing an internship on a ship for a few months, meaning he had no signal.

conducted via Microsoft Teams, unless mentioned otherwise. As said before, I deliberately did not ask standard questions regarding the interviewees' identities, as I wanted them to only share parts of themselves they felt comfortable sharing. I did ask almost all the interviewees to tell me their age, as I figured that would be something they would assumably not mind sharing, and it provides us with at least one identity aspect that coherently has been highlighted for each interviewee. The rest of the information provided below was either told during the introduction of the interview, or came up during the interview.

### **The protagonists**

**Daan** is a final year maritime officer student. He wanted me to guess his age; I guessed he was 24, he turned out to be 25. He is a man of colour and was born on Curaçao. Daan has lived there until 2007. He then lived in The Netherlands, but after two years, his mother decided they would move back to Curaçao. He went to a Dutch vmbo high school, after which he studied marketing and communication. When he finished his studies, he started working in urban management, but after two years he decided he wanted to do something else. Since his father and uncle are machinists, and his brother captain, he had many examples of seafarers in his family. Therefore, he always wondered what would happen if he would have been a seafarer, which is why he eventually took the plunge and moved to the Netherlands to study at STC.

**Diana** is a maritime officer student (“*level 4*”) as well, and was a shipping student (“*level 3*”) before. We had our conversation in real life at a location of STC. Diana is a 23-year old white man. During the interview, he made some controversial statements regarding sexuality, which made me *assume* he was a heterosexual man. ‘Boy, was I wrong’. When texting him to ask which pseudonym he wanted me to use, he texted me back stating he always uses Diana for “these kind of things”. When I asked him if he wanted to tell me where the name comes from, he told me: “It is the name I use on internet communities. I am bisexual and quite clumsy, so I might mention the name of my ex-boyfriend accidentally [in these communities]. The stigma on women being bisexual is less strong. It’s self preservation. In this way, the chance is smaller to receive hate messages. I can stand a lot, but not yet on this matter. It’s just a fail-safe.” After he shared this, he (again) stated: “Talking about it freely is not really my thing, I don’t know why people do that anyway. Straight people don’t share things like that all the time either haha. I don’t care what people do in that respect [their sexuality], I’m happy for them but I don’t see why that would matter, or why that would change something about a person.” Diana furthermore enjoys going to metal, rock and folk concerts and traveling. He lives in a village near Nijmegen and hates Rotterdam, because people in the big cities are unsociable.

**Anne** is 28 years old and a maritime officer student as well. She has been away for two years, so in the past year she had to get used to going to school again. She is a woman of colour and was raised on Saint Martin. During the interview, she told me she identifies as a lesbian woman. The interview with Anne was the only one conducted in English.

**Tommy** is a 20-year old white man. He lives in both IJsselmonde and Willemstad, since his parents are divorced. He went to a high school in Brabant, but identifies as a “*Rotterdammer*”. He has been studying at STC for four years and has another year to go. He started at level 2, and then went to level 4. Tommy subtly showed he found me attractive a few times, which made me feel somewhat uncomfortable. We met in a park, and when the interview was done he was very much interested in where I live and told me he could always come over if I needed anything else. He furthermore sent me a following request on Instagram and texted me a day after the interview. He was still very kind and did not cross any physical borders, but it made me very uncomfortable to feel like I was turning down an interviewee.

**Joshua** is a man of colour born on Curaçao. He has lived in The Netherlands for almost two years now, and feels like he has made the right choice to come and live here. To him, it felt relatively easy to come to The Netherlands, due to an organisation at Curaçao he paid to help him arrange everything. He is 24 years old, and has a job on the side of his study: he works in the warehouse of an online supermarket.

**Emma** is a white woman of 19 years old. She is a board member of the sloop row-team for women. She furthermore likes baking and told me she has an obsession for The United States, where she has lived for six months as well. Her father is a teacher in civics. In her previous class she was bullied, but is happy with her current class(mates).

**Dean** contacted me because Emma told him that it would be good for him to participate in my research. At first, he hesitated to participate, since he has a strong opinion on issues regarding discrimination, but Emma convinced him. He is a white male second years maritime officer student and he often mentioned his father is a police officer. He furthermore is a self-identifying fanatical motorcyclist, and does much work for charities.

**Mia** is a second years logistical supervisor student. She is very happy with her educational choice. She was born in Poland, but when she was very little, her parents moved to The Netherlands. Mia is a 20-year old white woman who told me she always participates in “*these kinds of little projects*”, since she likes to help. In the first year of her studies, she had mononucleosis, and was happy with the help provided by school.

**Max** lives in Brielle and is a second year all round operational technician student. He is a white man who has finished his havo at high school with a nature and technology profile. Afterwards, he did hbo (applied sciences) in maritime technics for a year, which he enjoyed very much, but he found out that the career opportunities did not match his personal interests after all. Nevertheless, he could start as a second year student at his current study. He participated in this research because he deems it important to tell stories from the point of views of students as well.

**Jess** is 19-year old white woman. She goes to STC in Brielle as well, and is one of the few girls there. She repeated a year, because she was severely depressed in her first year as a student. Fortunately, she feels better right now.

**Laura** is a maritime officier student. She is a 21-year old woman of colour who comes from Curaçao. She now lives in The Netherlands for one and a half years, and currently lives in a student residence in Rotterdam. She deems it important to spend much time on school and exams, which is why she was in the first place afraid that the interview would take too much of her time. Therefore, she asked me if the interview would not be too hard, because she did not want her school results to suffer from it.

**Aletta** is half Brazilian and half Dutch. She is 20 years old and in year two of the maritime officer study. Aletta first went to STC in Zwolle, where she was the only woman of colour. Many boys from small villages studied at that location, and she was bullied away by them. She told me it was very clear that not everyone was treated equally at that school. Aletta furthermore did not want me to record the interview and asked me to take notes during the conversation instead. During the interview, it became clear that she wanted to tell me some disturbing stories on teachers, and was afraid that this would be used against her in the future.